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- THE SWAPPER
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- EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE
- **SPLATOON**

ARKHAM KNIGHT

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS TO ROCKSTEADY'S EPIC CONCLUSION OF ITS DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY

HOW TO MAKE THE NEXT MARIO

Developers on the secrets behind creating gaming's iconic characters



GUERRILLA GAMES' SECRETS EXPOSED

Exclusive peek behind the scenes of the Killzone developer



How can Rocksteady make this *even bigger*? That was the question I asked myself when *Arkham City* was announced, the *Asylum* sequel that promised a combination of open-world gameplay to go alongside the tight, punchy metroidvania exploration of the original. It seemed like an impossible task at the time, and there are those who prefer *Asylum*'s design, but there's no denying *Arkham City* definitely saw Rocksteady go big.

So here we go again. How can Rocksteady make this *even bigger*? With Rocksteady back at the helm and fresh new console power behind it, *Arkham Knight* is going to be an absolute monster of a game. That much is clear. But besides the 'massive skyscrapers, grimy alleyways and glaring neon', there's a lot more that the new technology will enable the studio to do. We reveal everything from how the Batmobile will work to Scarecrow's masterplan to conquer Gotham City.

For those interested in games development, this issue also sees **games™** take a look at the original pitches for games like *BioShock* and *Gears Of War*, go behind the scenes at *Killzone* studio Guerrilla Games and talk to various developers about what it takes to create an iconic character. So all in all, it's another huge issue of **games™**. Our biggest one yet? Hardly surprising given Rocksteady's presence in the mag...

Ryan King

Ryan King
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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NEW SPECIES

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Forza Horizon 2
gamesTM gets behind the wheel of Playground Games' sequel to its anarchic Forza debut

(THE UNREAL MCCOY)

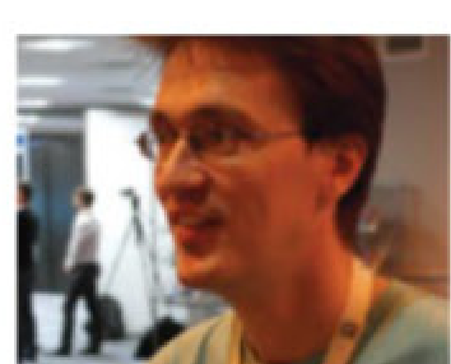
Unreal Engine 4

Inside the industry's first next-gen engine

→ With humble origins in 1998's Unreal, the Unreal Engine has gone from strength to strength, recently receiving the 'Most Successful Videogame Engine Ever' award from the Guinness Book of World Records. We caught up with the engine's lead programmer, James Golding

After the release of *Gears Of War 3*, there were a few rumours circulating the industry about Epic pulling out of game development to focus more on maintaining and upgrading its Unreal Engine, centring itself more as a provider and consultant to other studios, rather than a creative force itself. These rumours were proved false, though, with the announcement of *Fortnite* and two as-yet-untitled releases confirmed as 'in development' at Epic at the start of the year.

Epic rounded on the idea that it was retracting from development in style, too; announcing a flank-hitting pincer attack on gaming platforms, eager to prove that Unreal Engine 4 is as easy to work with on mobile and tablet as it is on console and PC. Aside from the confirmed *Fortnite* (previewed later in this issue), Epic is also working on an undisclosed mobile game and a high-end current-gen title – between the three projects, the studio looks set to make a statement about Unreal Engine 4 and its place in the market: it can do *anything*.



Above James Golding has been powering the industry with Epic and the Unreal Engine for 12 years.

"It might sound trite, but the idea with Unreal 4 was to make it accessible to everyone," explains the engine's lead programmer and Unreal veteran James Golding. "The idea was to come up with something that would work with everyone – whether you're a small studio with a slim workforce, or a larger studio, or if you work in film development, if you're an architect… there are so many applications you can use the engine for, we wanted people to be able to get hold of it without too much red tape, without too many restrictions in place." With Unreal Engine 4, Epic is moving away from

DATA STREAM → BIOWARE CONFIRMS THE RETURN OF LAND-BASED VEHICLE MAKO IN MASS EFFECT 4

Your guide to the essential stories



"If you see there are a lot of people trying to make something like Skyrim, you think 'maybe we should do something about making larger environments'"

James Golding, Unreal's lead programmer

the licence-based business model that's made the company so successful. While the model may have been beneficial to Epic and the triple-A studios that signed up to its licence, we're seeing game development move away from a reliance on the old guard at the minute, with a huge proportion of games development taking place in smaller, decentralised indie studios. The Unity engine – with its user-friendly UI, huge asset library and open partnership program – is an incredibly attractive option for first-time developers or micro-studios that don't have the funds to invest in anything expensive (like a licence) at startup. Is Epic looking to move into that market?

"WE DIDN'T WANT to look too much at anyone else when we were thinking about where to take [Unreal]," Golding responds. "Making Unreal more open wasn't a response to anyone; it was more looking at the product we had from a fresh perspective and thinking about what we could do with it: looking at how we want to price it, how we want to distribute it, how we want to engage with people. We're just doing our own thing with [the engine], and I think that's a much healthier way of moving forward."

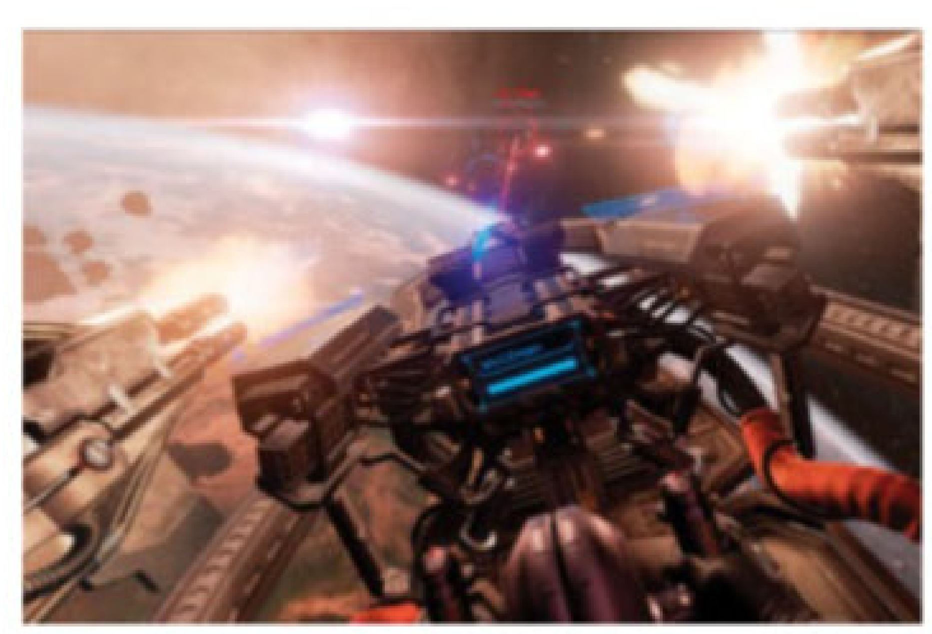
The Unreal Engine wasn't exactly unpopular before Epic decided to make it more open, though; in many ways it defined the last generation's visuals – *Gears Of War* was the first real taste of what the Xbox 360 could achieve; a visual example of the power Unreal 3 had whirring beneath its hood. Since then, the engine has been used primarily for FPS games (the detailed rendering owes itself to the intimate view of the first-person shooter, specifically) but has also been put to great use in RPGs, platformers, stealth games, MMOs and more.

Above The Unreal Engine might be known for its dark corridors and eldritch lighting, but this screen clearly shows its capable of more traditionally stunning vistas, too.

"We spend a lot of time on the [Unreal forums] or on Twitter, seeing what people are up to, what they're doing with the engine," explains Golding, after taking us through some of the myriad games the Unreal community had been sharing with him recently. "It's informative about the engine – if you see there's a lot of people trying to make something like *Skyrim*, you think 'maybe we should do something about making larger environments'. We saw a lot of people trying to make games revolving around vehicles, for example, and we were pretty quick in getting support for that in on the engine. It's both motivating and helpful, listening to what our community wants, and



Inset The *other* Unreal tech demo looks more towards the realistic, showing off light distortion when the ninja-like protagonist engages its shimmery stealth shield. Another string to Unreal's powerful bow, then.



Above From the depths of hell to the heady heights of space, if you've got a vision in your mind's eye, you can realise it with Unreal.

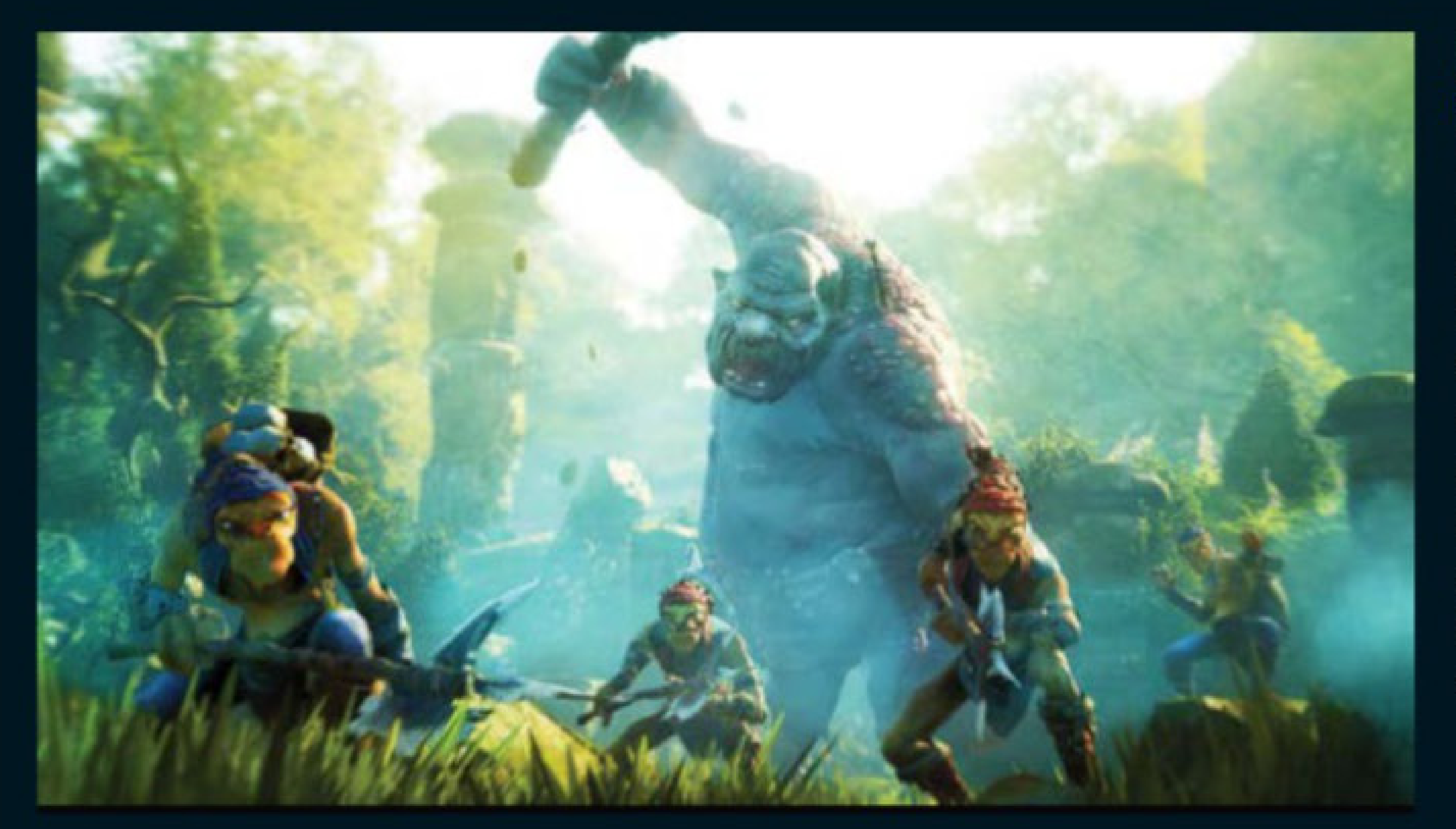


TELLTALE ANNOUNCES THAT IT'S WORKING ON THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON 3. BUT WHO WILL STAR?



Unreal estate

→ The Unreal Engine defined a lot of what we saw going on during the last generation, but will it be as popular and widespread in the coming years? With its new open licence and availability to indies, the answer has to be a resounding 'yes'. Here are five games confirmed to use the engine so far...



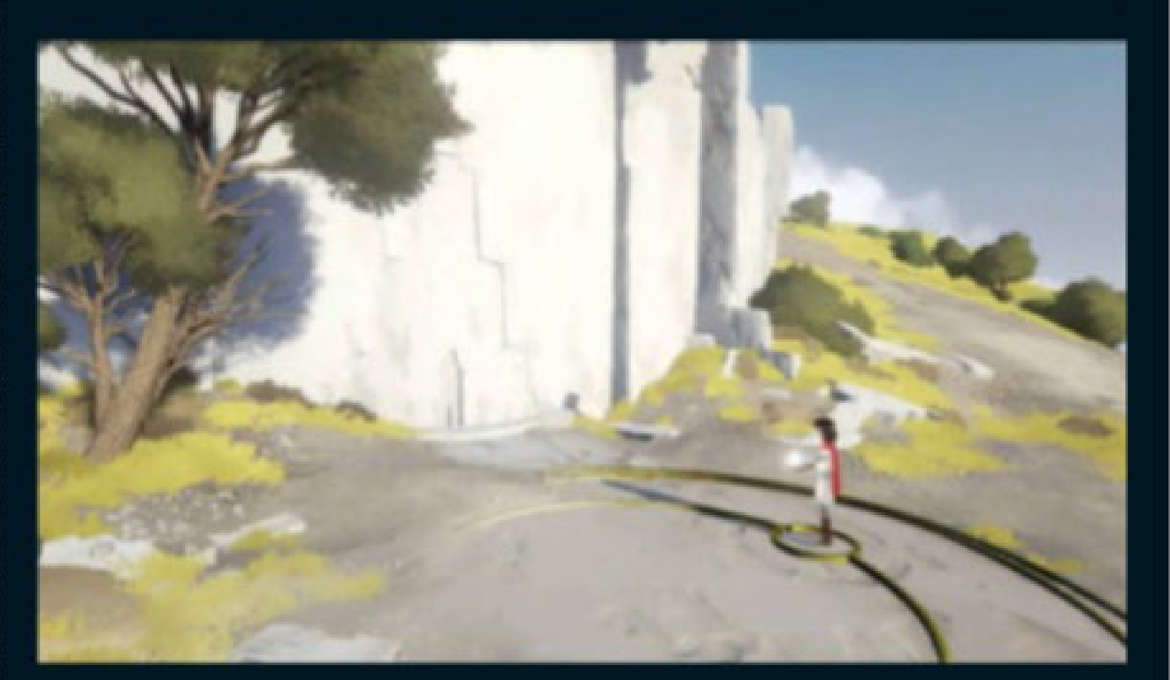
FABLE LEGENDS

LIONHEAD'S NEWEST *Fable* instalment will use Unreal, and it seems like a perfect marriage: that high-fantasy realm illustrated with uber-detailed environments and smooth, fluid animations. Here's hoping it isn't as broken as *Fable III*, though.



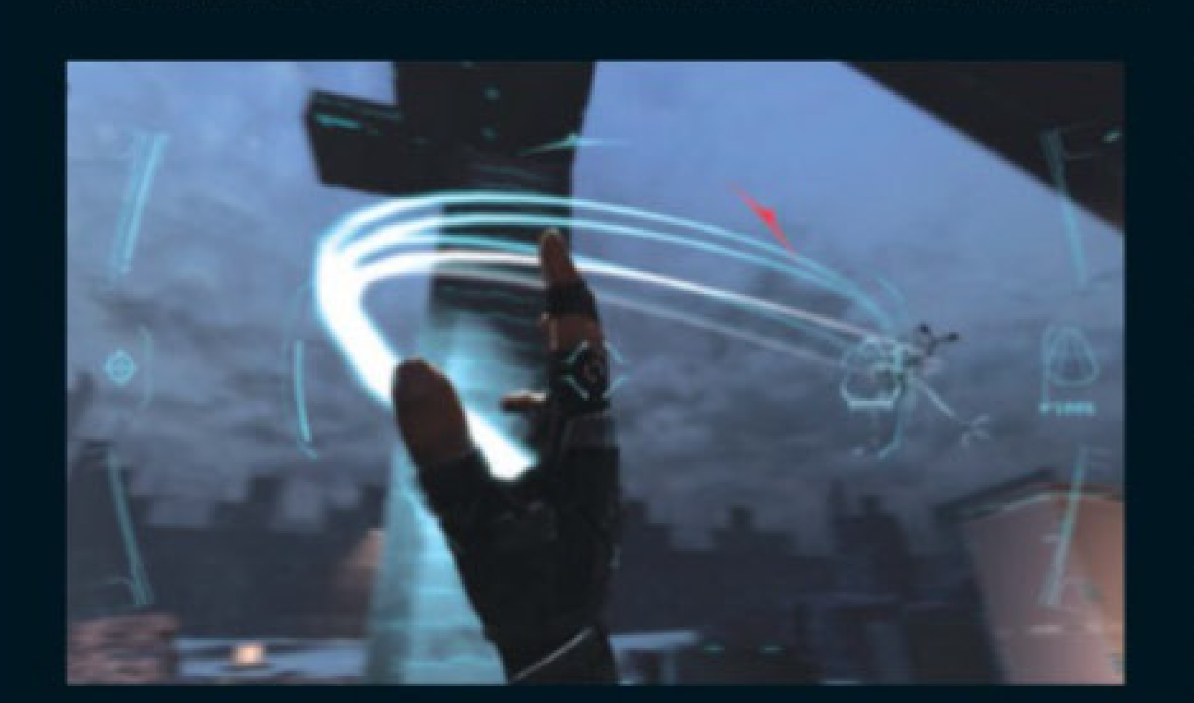
TEKKEN 7

THE SEMINAL 3D fighter has shifted to Unreal for the first time in its development history, the developer Namco citing the multi-platform friendly C++ code as one of the main reasons for the migration. Maybe it's finally time for a PC version of *Tekken*...



RIME

UNREAL ENGINE-powered games are typically thought of as grizzly, fire-red affairs – making use of the engine's phenomenal lighting power to create moody caves and so on. Tequila Works' *Rime* bucks that trend, opting for a more colourful approach.



EDEN STAR

SOMEWHERE between *Mirror's Edge*'s free-running, parkour madness and *Red Faction*'s Martian landscape destruction lies *Eden Star*, a day-night exploration game that tasks you with sniffing out survivors of some dark apocalypse.



OBDUCTION

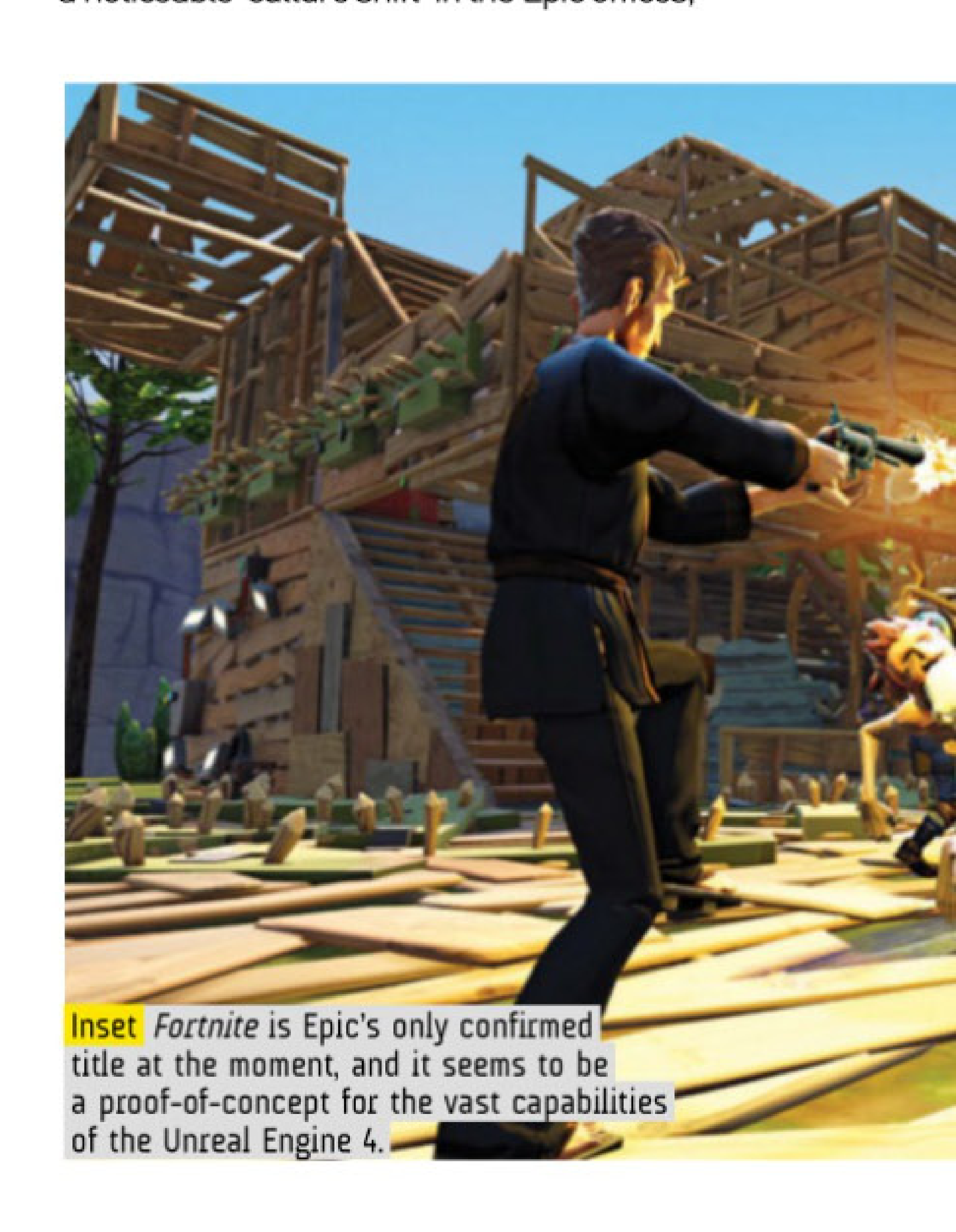
A SPIRITUAL successor to developer Cyan Worlds' past games *Myst* and *Riven*, Obduction's art style is reminiscent of *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* and *Child Of Light* rolled into one. A sequel long overdue; Unreal Engine 4 is the perfect fit.



Right The tech demos published by Unreal so far are a testament to what the engine can achieve. Historically, the final game's offerings will look just as good.

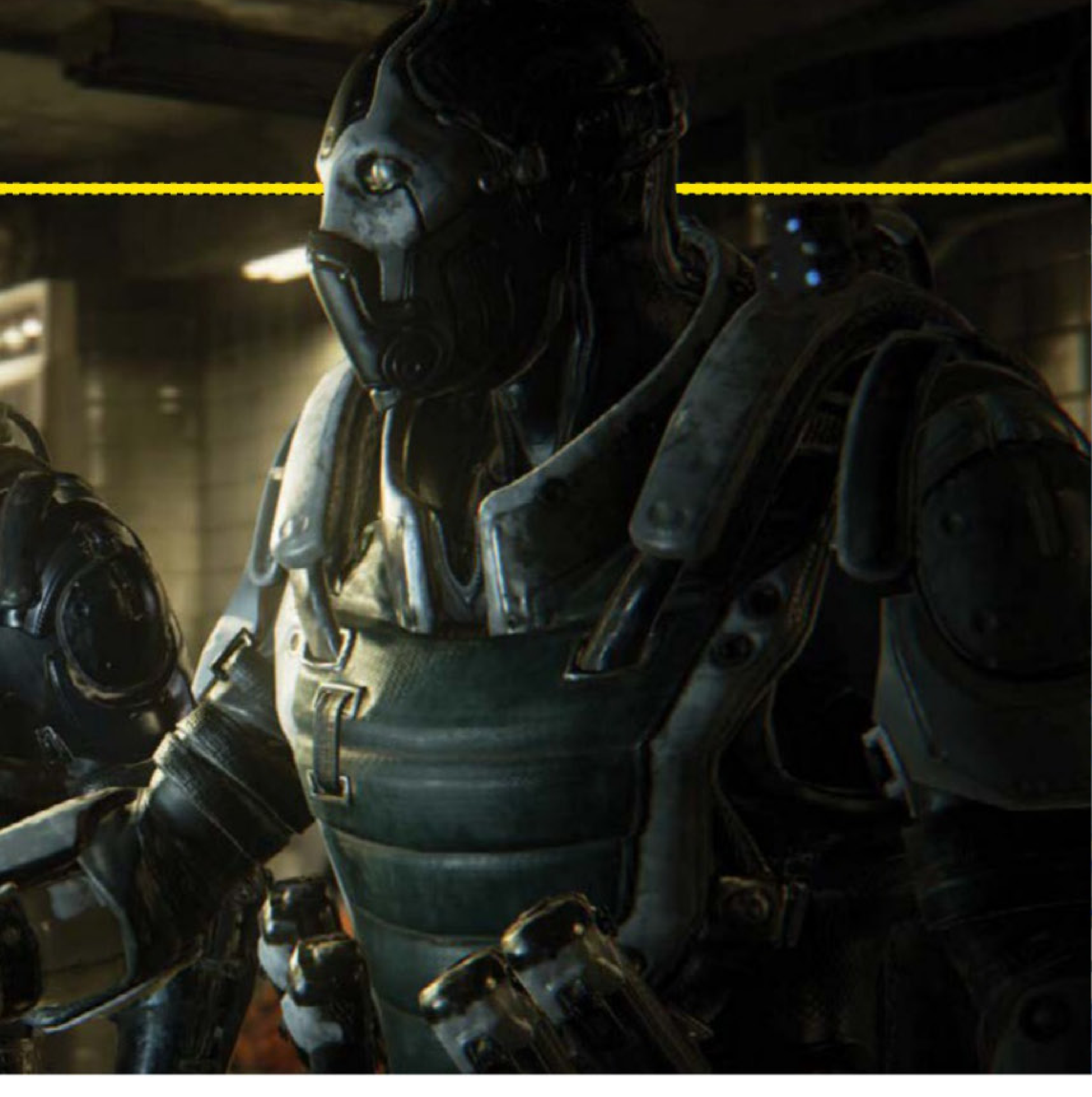
with [the shift with Unreal 4], we've been trying to cater to the community and get some actionable information from a very diverse group of people."

THERE WERE OVER 100 engineers working on the Unreal Engine 4 in the run up to its launch, and over 100 developers at any one time contribute to Epic's games. With Unreal 4 making this community so much larger, Golding informs us that there's been a noticeable 'culture shift' in the Epic offices,



Inset *Fortnite* is Epic's only confirmed title at the moment, and it seems to be a proof-of-concept for the vast capabilities of the Unreal Engine 4.

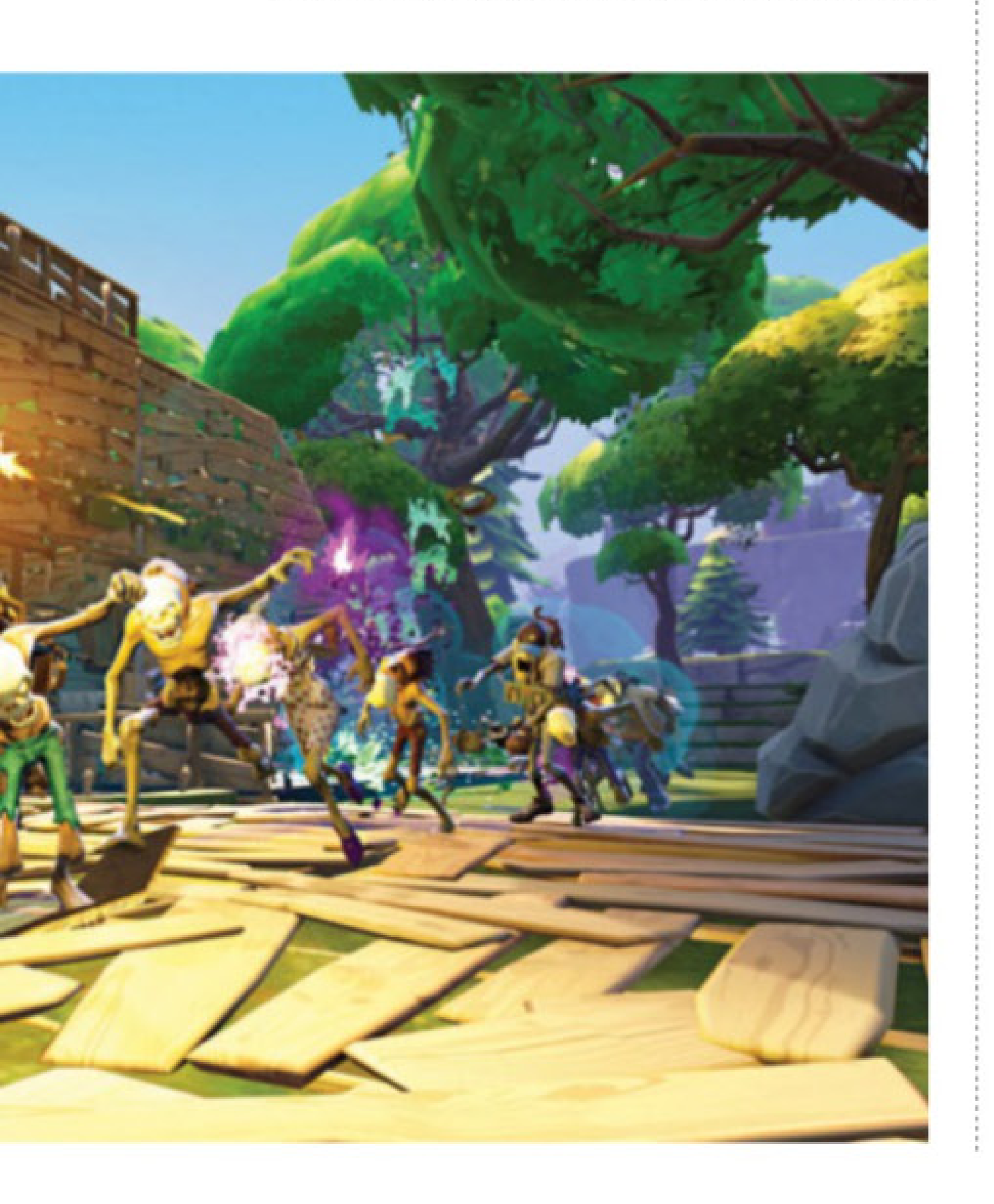
DATA STREAM → BROWNCOATS REJOICE! FIREFLY ONLINE REUNITES THE CAST OF THE EX-TV SHOW





and its having tangible effects on the way the engine grows.

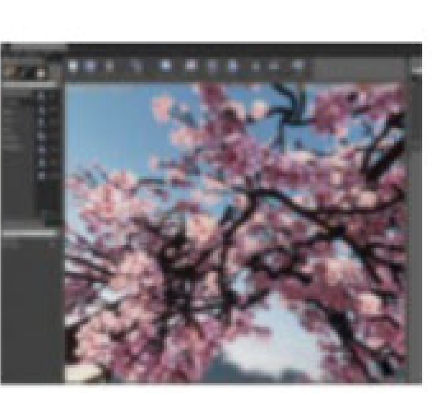
"When the team was really knuckling down to try and get Unreal 4 out of the door, there was a definite shift, and it kind of revolved around three big things," Golding expounds. "One was 'being more open', which we tried in lots of different ways: devs on the forum, Twitch streams, making our road-map and any updates we made to the engine public. This made communication with devs *so* much easier, because there was never that fear of 'Oh, are we allowed to talk about this yet?' Then there's the 'generosity' part, I guess; where (we hope!) we've done a pricing model people think is fair, where we try to make sure people get a good deal. We thought about putting DRM in, but it's restrictive, it's annoying, people don't want it. We hope this trust will come back and help us out in the future.

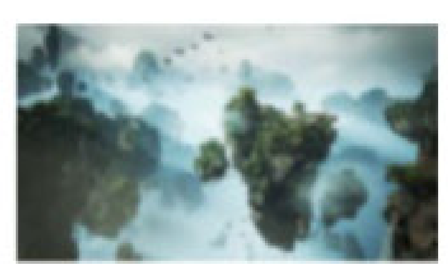


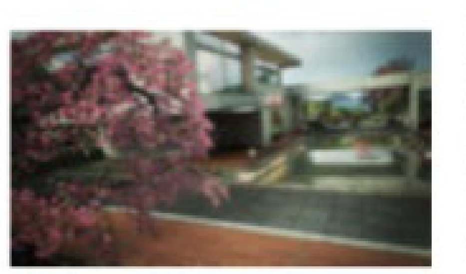
"Then there's the final thing – more collaboration within the company, getting people to work more closely with each other than we have in the past. That collaborative nature within the company has come about more since the release of [Unreal 4] – it feels like a return to that smaller developer vibe we had back when I joined the company in 2002: you know, in the Unreal Tournament 2002/2003 era."

Back in 2006, Epic had a lot to prove with *Gears Of War*. It stormed onto a new generation with big elbows and a loud voice, proclaiming itself the most powerful graphics engine out there – the vascular meatheads at the game's core a potent metaphor for the strength of the engine's power. Now, with Unreal 4, Epic doesn't need to focus on graphical fidelity – its Unreal is already synonymous with that – rather, *Fortnite* and the unannounced titles need to showcase the Engine's versatility: there's no such thing as niche on this new generation, every genre will find success somewhere, and if Unreal wants to keep its crown, it's going to have to prove it's more than a (very good-looking) one-trick pony.

> "It might sound trite, but the idea with Unreal 4 was to make it accessible to everyone"
> James Golding, Unreal's lead programmer







Above The 'blueprints' toolset within the engine allows developers to drag assets in and observe them in real-time, meaning they can tinker with code and see the effects right before them, making the developmental process more streamlined and easing communication between designers, and programmers.

TAKING A STEP BACK

> HOME COMFORTS

It must be difficult to spend your working life inside an engine, working on its component parts and tinkering with the veins and arteries that keep it alive, to then step out and observe it with fresh eyes. We asked James Golding what it was like to go home and play a game using his engine – his work – and what game he thinks does the most justice to Unreal's collection of tools.

"The sign of a great Unreal Engine game, to me, is one where I stop looking for the bugs and looking for the code that I've written and just *play the game*. With *Mass Effect* or *Batman*, for example, I'm playing a really good game and not looking behind the curtain. I'd say my favourite game in the engine, right now, is probably *Mass Effect*: what [BioWare] did with the atmosphere, the music, the design, it all worked really well together and made something really special, I think. (If you asked me on a different day, I'd probably say something else, though!).



AFTER MUCH SPECULATION, GOOGLE HAS REPORTEDLY PURCHASED TWITCH FOR $1 BILLION





(BIG MONEY)

Veteran Devs Unite For Radical Publisher

→ LA charity project that aims to get people donating to worthy causes while having fun is back on track – but why the wait?

Call it a sixth sense, perhaps, but when games™ sent Martin De Ronde a quick Facebook message, we didn't quite expect such immediacy in his response. It was 2 April 2014, some three-and-a-bit years after the release of *WINtA*, a music videogame for iOS that was released for OneBigGame, the world's first non-profit making games publisher, which generates money for charity. Given that there had been absolutely no activity since then, we had assumed OneBigGame was simply dead in the water, an idea that had shown so much promise and good intention, but had tragically fizzled away as, unfortunately, so many good ideas often do.

> "People did wonder whether OneBigGame still existed"
> David Perry

But no. Martin De Ronde, who had founded OneBigGame, surprised us. "Sorry for the radio silence," he wrote, on April 15. "Busy with, among other things, OneBigGame. We just announced our new game today: *SXPD*." With that, the whole idea of OneBigGame was back on the table and very much alive. "Some people did wonder whether OneBigGame still existed at a certain point," he admitted when we caught up with him properly later on. "But patience is a virtue, they say, and David Perry's *SXPD* is a great game to return to the limelight with."

Had OneBigGame disappeared within those intervening years, it would have been a travesty. After all, *WINtA* and the game that preceded it by ten months, *Chime*, had done so well that they made around $100,000, 96 per cent of which was handed to Save The Children and the Starlight Children's Foundation. With *SXPD*, De Ronde is hoping to repeat this success, but it is fair to say that getting to this point has not been easy. At one point, there had been a comparison between OneBigGame and Live Aid when the former was founded in 2007, but – as the project has seen – there is a massive difference between knocking up a little ditty and producing a compelling, addictive game.

"It's not difficult to get the enthusiasm of developers and encourage them to buy in, but trying to find ways to work around their schedules is definitely a challenge, yes," De Ronde admits. "The good thing is that we have multiple projects in the pipeline. For every project that is on hold, there is always another that's getting back up to speed."

One of the games currently stagnating is a point-and-click adventure based on *Minesweeper*, which is being worked on by Revolution Software's Charles Cecil and a group of students in the Netherlands. It was a cross between *Minesweeper* and *Advance Wars* with a large map and multiple levels, but was put on hold, presumably while Cecil worked on the latest *Broken Sword* adventure following a successful Kickstarter. "When *Broken Sword 5* came along, I really couldn't afford the time," Cecil says. But he has vowed to get in touch with De Ronde and resurrect the game. It's just these things take time.

"We actually have a prototype for Charles' game – a very cool prototype actually, although it's been a while since any work on it has been done," De Ronde enthuses. "We definitely need to get back on that, but as always, it is down to people's availability and finding the right team to work on the actual game."

With such struggles in mind, it is easy to see why OneBigGame abandoned its original idea: it was initially aiming to create one big game. It wanted to get some of the most recognised names in the videogame industry together to kick ideas around and develop a title that was awash with ideas and creativity; a Band Aid for gaming. However, if it is hard



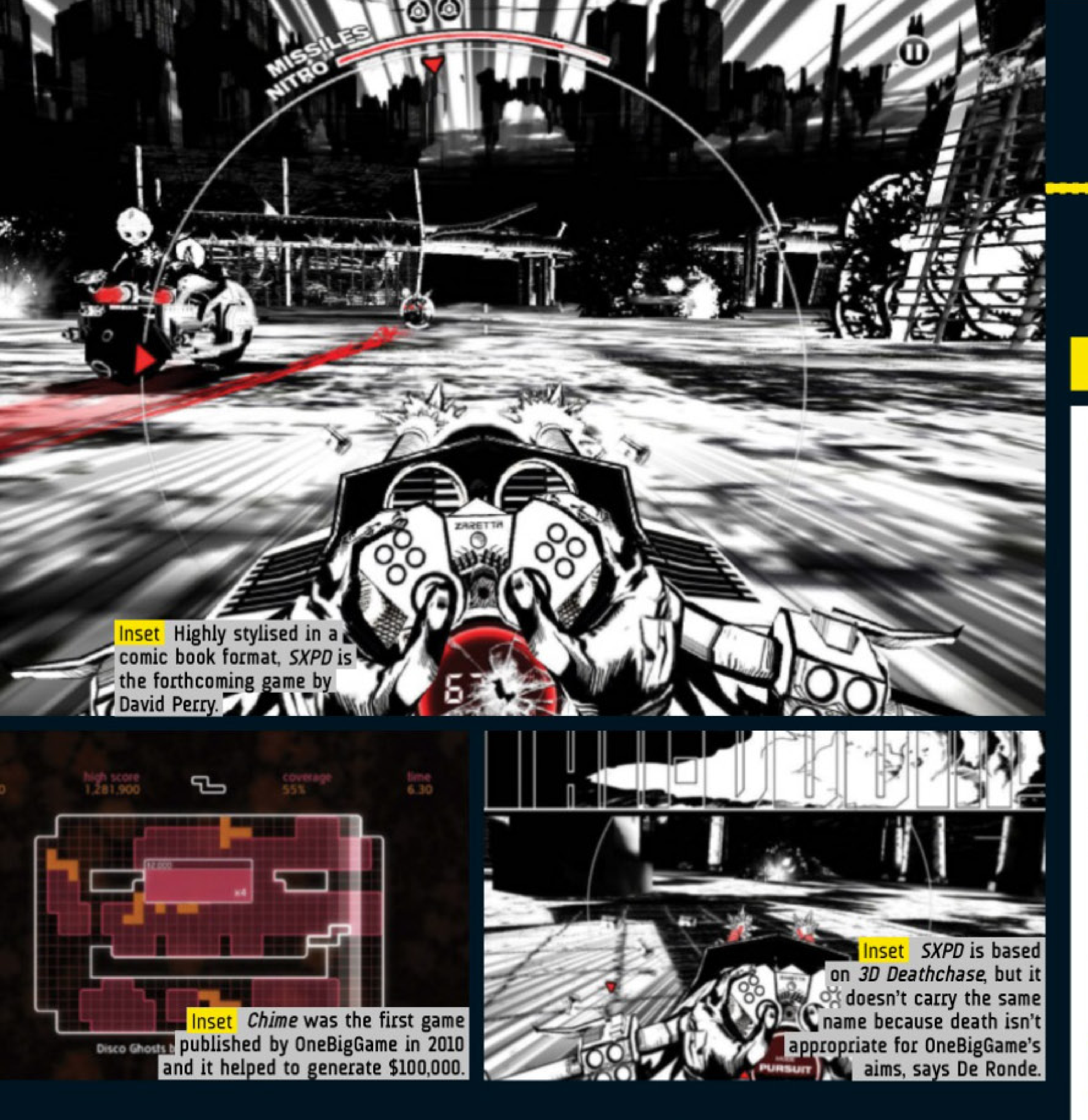
Above *WINtA* was an iOS release. It was free with in-app purchases.



Right There is no shortage of talent wanting to get involved in OneBigGame as Masaya Matsuura, maker of *PaRappa The Rapper* proved.



DEEP SILVER BUYS THE RIGHTS TO HOMEFRONT: REVOLUTION; DEVELOPED BY NEW TEAM DAMBUSTERS STUDIOS



Inset Highly stylised in a comic book format, *SXPD* is the forthcoming game by David Perry.

Inset *Chime* was the first game published by OneBigGame in 2010 and it helped to generate $100,000.

Inset *SXPD* is based on *3D Deathchase*, but it doesn't carry the same name because death isn't appropriate for OneBigGame's aims, says De Ronde.

to pin down smaller teams, imagine having to pull so many people away from their own projects at the same time. "There was quite a bit of enthusiasm from individual famous game designers, but some were tied up, in crunch time and others were, let's say, closely monitored by their publishers," says De Ronde, who abandoned the idea shortly afterwards.

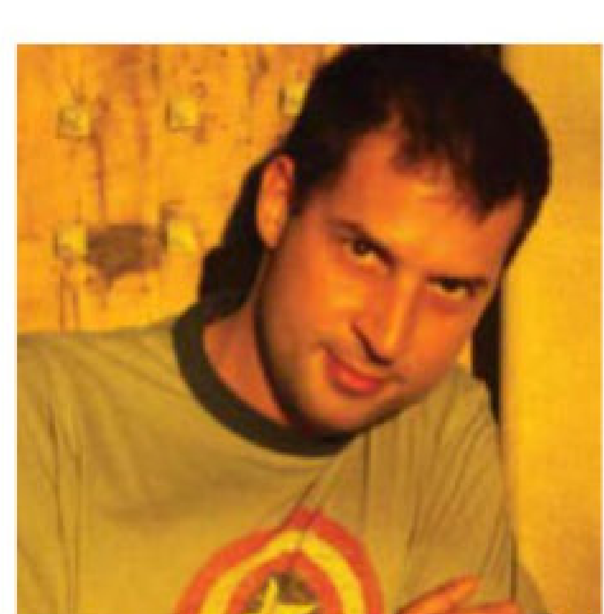
Chime proved that the new approach of lots of little games would work well, though. "OneBigGame is forever indebted to Zoë Mode," says De Ronde. "I couldn't believe it when it showed us the first prototype of *Chime*." And although *WiNtA* by Masaya '*PaRappa the Rapper*' Matsuura didn't do as well – it relied on in-app purchases to raise cash – De Ronde is sticking to the same kind of path for now, which is to say that it's allowing creators to map their own journey. "Our role is to try and create the best environment for all involved parties to work in," he explains. "We look to take away tasks that developers don't like to do and provide input, suggestions and feedback on the game."



With that being said, however, there is one rule of sorts. While developers are free to unleash their creativity ("it was a lot less pressure because it wasn't a normal 16-hours-a-day project", says Perry) they are asked not to make a game that is specifically *about* charity. This suits the developers, however. "I can't stand it when people try to force an agenda, like 'you must make the rice game because we need to teach kids about the need for rice.' Gag," exclaims Perry, who managed to strike gold when he developed *Earthworm Jim* back in 1994. "There are so many better ways to go about this stuff."

De Ronde promises there are plenty more games on the horizon, although the main focus is on the iPhone release of *SXPD* with other platform versions due soon. "It's a unique game," concludes De Ronde. "It lets you experience what the speeder bike scene from *Return Of The Jedi* must have felt like for Luke and Leia, and Duke Mighten's artwork is absolutely amazing. Oh, and it's only £1.49 and it's for charity, so you can't go wrong."

COMIC TIMING



They say that timing is everything, and it's been a long time coming, but David Perry's release of *SXPD* – a comic-book game hybrid based on Speccy classic *3D Deathchase* – is finally here. Perry talks about his inspiration for *SXDP*

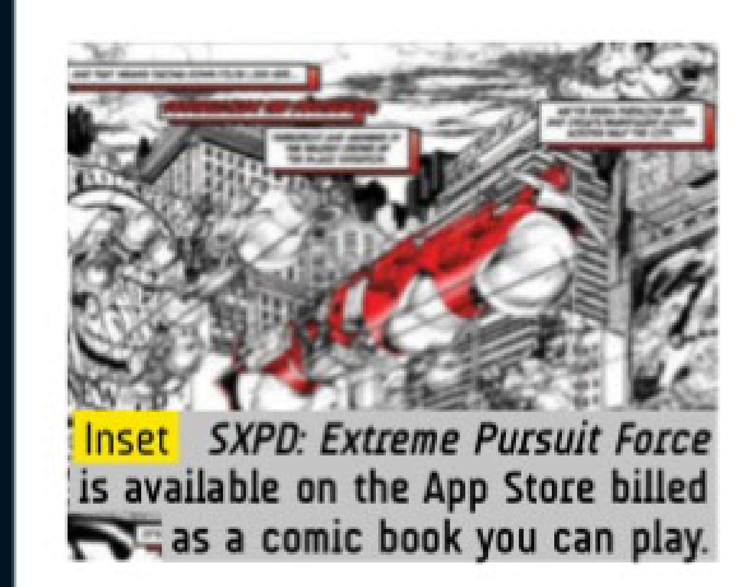
What attracted you to *3D Deathchase*?
I was a game programmer on the Sinclair Spectrum for several years and I spent a lot of time trying to push the hardware to its limits. It was like the Wild West back then. You'd have some engineering breakthrough, you'd get the machine to do something never seen before and then you'd design a game around that new hook. I remember looking at *3D Deathchase* and just thinking 'how the heck is he doing that'. It's one of the games that I never forgot.

Did you have any set ideas for how you wanted *SXPD* to be?
3D Deathchase made the Sinclair Spectrum look more powerful than it really was, so that was the challenge I made to the Little Chicken development team – to push the engine on the iPad very hard. The result was a lot of motion and the feeling of really racing fast through the environments.

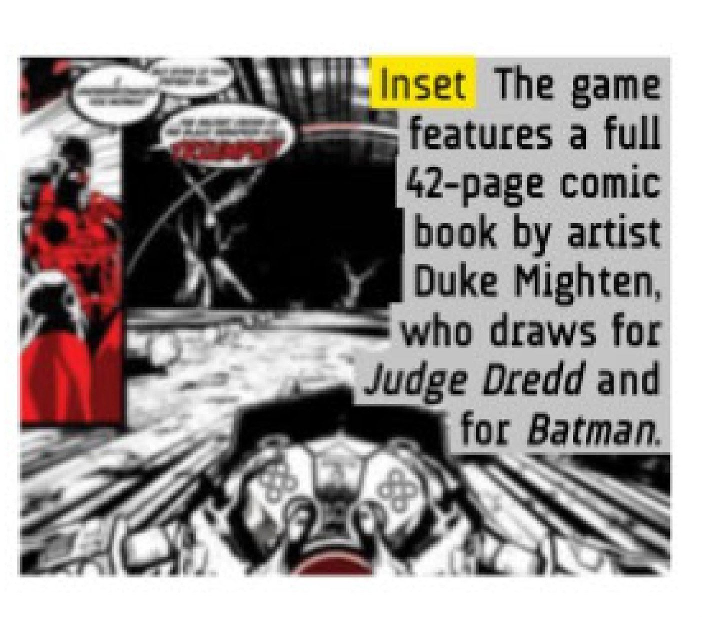
Could the original idea of lots of developers working on one major release have worked?
I'm an optimist and I believe that anything is possible, I really do, so my imagination starts running wild when I think of all the publishers coming together, sharing their IP just one time for charity. Then the sad reality sets in and you see how far we still have to go.

Would you produce another game?
Yes, but I would need to be able to spend more time with the team. I really missed that interaction and all the fun brainstorming that goes with it. Despite how it's presented in the industry, the best games are generated from ideas from everyone in the team, not a single individual. I love it when someone makes a comment and doesn't even realise they just invented something.

Why should people buy *SXPD*?
It's got that old retro feel, it's short, simple and challenging, it feels different from any other iOS game and it looks beautiful. We are not asking for big donations, it's just a few bucks and it's going to help children in need.



Inset *SXPD: Extreme Pursuit Force* is available on the App Store billed as a comic book you can play.



Inset The game features a full 42-page comic book by artist Duke Mighten, who draws for *Judge Dredd* and for *Batman*.



(INDEPENDENTS' DAY)

Capybara Studios: Leading indies on Xbox One

→ Nathan Vella is president and co-founder of Capybara Studios and member of the Indie Fund, a collective whose purpose is "to encourage the next generation of games developers" by offering funding and consultation to smaller studios. **games™** caught up with Nathan to talk about Capy, the Indie Fund and the creative development across the world…

When you started Capybara, you claimed you and your friends "didn't have a fucking clue what you were doing". Is that still true now – is learning to own your own studio a constantly evolving lesson?

Continuing to be open and continuing to learn is the most important piece of the puzzle; having experienced people come in and help out and consult has been great. A team that's made up of multiple different people with multiple different perspectives and multiple different roles can offer feedback on all sorts of things, outside of their traditional roles.

But I don't know HR, though, for example. We don't have any process about how we hire people; look at the last four or five guys we hired – they were friends of ours, we went out for food with them, we went out for beers with them, we played their stuff before. Another guy was a Masters grad from a local University that was making cool stuff and we just invited him to the studio to hang out. In answer to your question, we've managed to find a group of people to stick together, work together, make interesting stuff together. We're nine years old as a studio, and most people there have been around seven, eight, nine years – I'm proud of that. We're not just a group of hired guns banding together to bang out one feature; we've given people the shot at developing their first games, and those people have stuck around.

Has working with the Indie Fund and funding games internationally given you a wider perspective on the games industry, allowed you to better understand how the industry works?

Oh, absolutely. There's a lot of talk in the industry right now about 'where the next big thing is coming from' and if you look at the Nordic countries, they're crushing it in a lot of different areas; whether that's mobile, or *Minecraft*… there's a lot of good stuff coming from there. There's a big indie scene in Toronto, too, as well as L.A. A lot of people are talking about what's going to happen in the indie scene from Japan and what the next big thing from there will be, especially with Kickstarter taking off over there now and Itagaki-san going independent.



Above Nathan Vella of Capybara Games is also one of the founding members of the Indie Fund.

Do you think this widespread developmental surge will have an impact on the games we'll be playing a few years down the line?

For sure, yeah. Right now, there's a huge mesh of things happening all at the same time. I think the insanity that is game development is being mirrored in the way the industry is working now. I think it was Shahid [Ahmad, PlayStation Strategic Content manager] that said something along the lines of 'There's more crazy stuff going on now than there was during the original Nintendo/NES days' – I'm hugely paraphrasing, obviously. But that's a really interesting point to me; when you look nostalgically back on what system had the most crazy-weird, out-there games, it was the PS2 and the SNES, and now we're in a time where developers have the freedom to develop what they want, and a platform to put it on.

So do you think this decentralisation of game development, away from the

→ VALVE ADDS THUMBSTICK TO STEAM CONTROLLER PROTOTYPE, AFTER SHOWCASING STICKLESS VERSION



reliance on triple-A studios, is a positive thing for gamers, overall?
It just means that, as a developer, you've got access to a wider audience – there's always going to be someone out there that's interested in playing the same game you're interested in making. I mean, who could have ever guessed the 'simulation genre' would ever get as *huge* as it is now? What appeals to certain people is completely nebulous, and anyone that thinks they know what people want is kidding themselves. That's why, for us, it's important to just make shit that we want to play. With [*Superbrothers: Sword and Sorcery*] we thought there must be at least 50,000 people out there that want a game with this tone, this atmosphere, this aesthetic.

We were wrong with that number… by a significant margin (in a good way!)… but it just proves that there are enough people playing games now that a 'niche' should not be considered small any more. The smallest niche in the industry – like interactive fiction, or something tiny – has the kind of games out there that are still selling tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of copies. That's the most interesting thing about game development at the moment: it's open season.

> "That's the most interesting thing about game development at the moment: it's open season"
> Nathan Vella, Capybara Games

Above Capybara's upcoming *Below* is a non-verbal, minimalist adventure, taking new tech and stripping it back to visuals and atmosphere alone; an adventurous release on the Xbox One







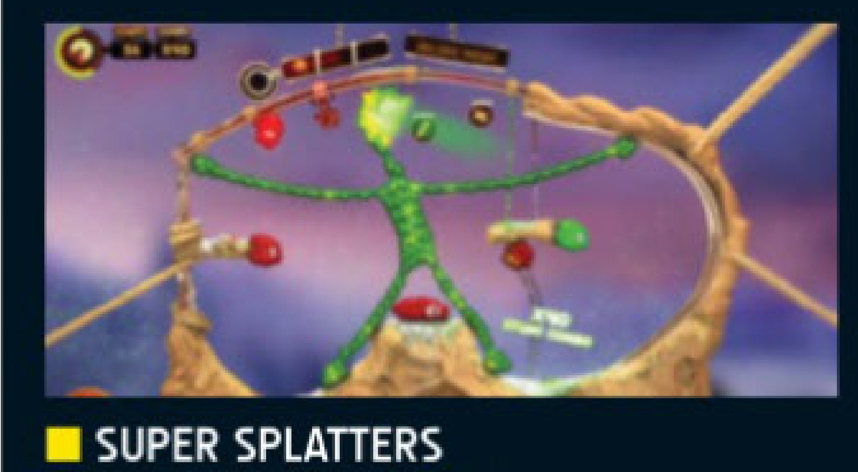
Inset *Superbrothers: Sword & Sorcery* found success in Japan and the West, largely down to the fantastic localisation job 8-4 did.

IT'S ALL FUNDS AND GAMES

The Indie Fund is an organisation set up by independent developers for independent developers. Created in early 2010, the Fund acts as a sort-of publisher for indie titles, fronting studios money to help in the completion of their games without the restrictive contractual stipulations enacted by such traditional clauses. These are some of the games the Fund has helped, or is currently in the process of helping:

DEAR ESTHER
The Chinese Room // 2012

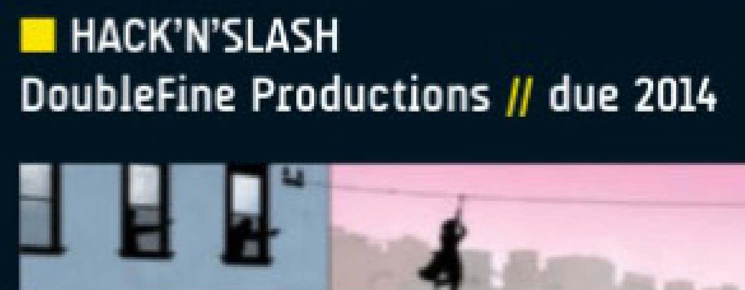
THE SWAPPER
Faceplam Games // 2013

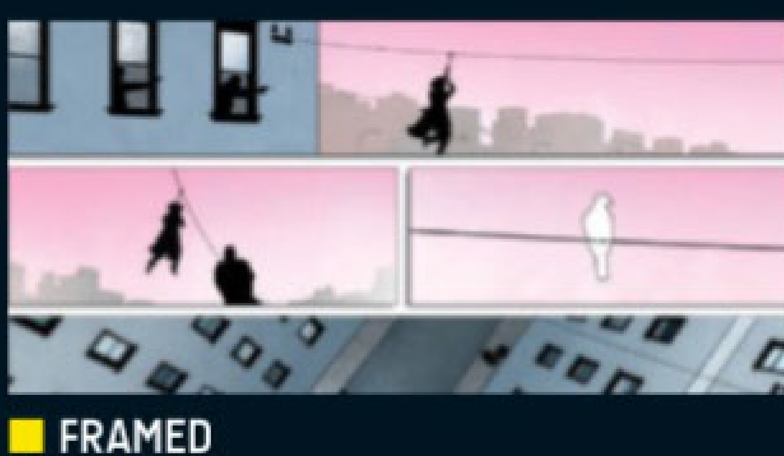


SUPER SPLATTERS
SpikySnail Games // 2013



HACK'N'SLASH
DoubleFine Productions // due 2014





FRAMED
Loveshack Entertainment // due 2014

GAME OF THRONES CO-STAR MAISIE WILLIAMS IS IN TALKS TO PLAY ELLIE IN THE LAST OF US MOVIE

(OPINION)

Why games are getting easier

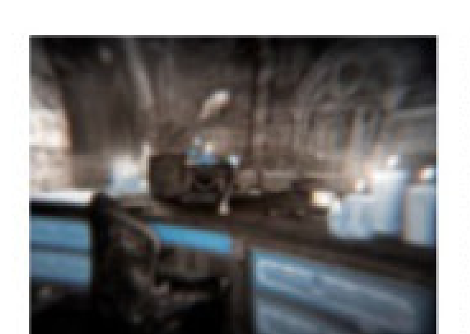
→ In a time when technology is allowing us to do anything we want with games, why are so many titles so unsatisfyingly short – so easy to complete, even on the hardest of difficulties? **games™** reflects on the strange state of the inverted difficulty curve



***Dishonored*, *Tomb Raider*, *Watch Dogs*, *Hitman: Absolution*,** *Thief*, *The Last Of Us*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and the *Batman: Arkham* series – all great games, and all scoring well in this magazine, but all commit a cardinal sin that is diluting the very experience of playing a game. Each game listed above has a mechanic that highlights interactive objects. That might not sound too bad on its own, but when you pick that simple mechanic apart and observe what it does to our instincts, the implications are big.

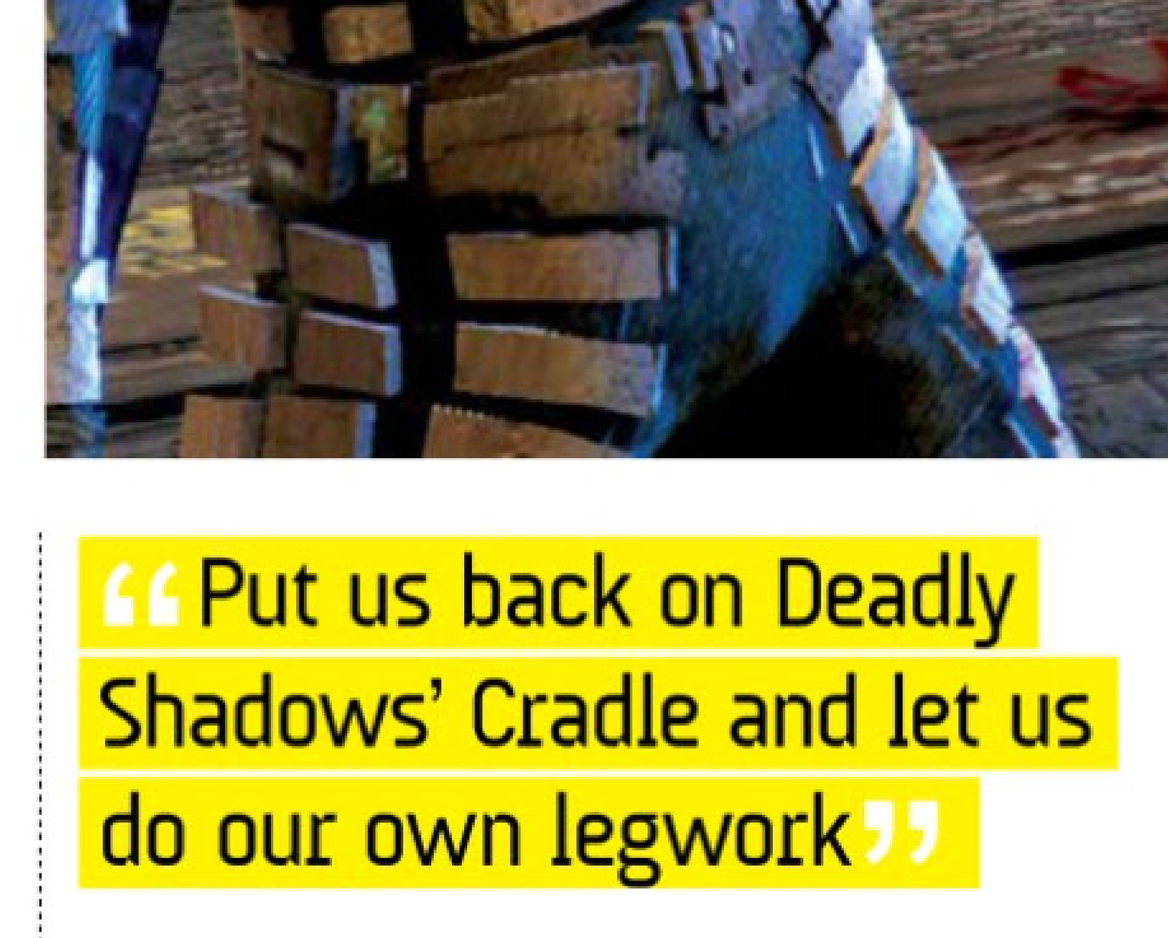
By giving important items and objectives a different visual language and by highlighting *everything* that we need to find, developers are taking the agency away from us as players, holding our hands and pointing at that switch on the wall and saying 'here, press this'. Back in the days of the yore, you'd have to wander round every pixelated map or every pre-rendered screen, mashing A or X to try and interact with something. It made you observe, it made you think, but most of all, it made you appreciate the level design that designers had poured their sweat and blood into.

Nowadays, most games have a button you can press to highlight the nearest objective, show a path to the next room or – worst of all – have all important items constantly glowing with this weird shiny overlay that came to be a trope of action-adventure games last gen. The mechanic is such a game-y thing – turning the delicate work of myriad 3D artists and modellers into some cheap turn-of-the-millennium virtual reality display: a hyper-virtual annotation of everything you see on screen.



Above A lot of players of Eidos' most recent *Thief* instalment took umbrage with the poppy-fuelled Focus mode. It wasn't present in the original, and it felt fairly redundant. At least you had the option to turn it off, though.

We fully understand that some gamers appreciate the extra push with mechanics and hints like these, but when a game doesn't even let you deactivate the damn things or, worse yet, forces you to use it to progress (we're looking at you, *Batman*) we can't help but feel our immersion in this world of otherwise realistic textures is broken. Why? Because *doors don't shimmer in real life*. Deduction in life is not automatic. If a game insists on including detective modes or in-game hints, surely there should be some kind of drawback? Too many games make it far too easy to hit a button and have all the work done for you.



> "Put us back on Deadly Shadows' Cradle and let us do our own legwork"

Surely the whole point of playing a stealth game is to embark on a power fantasy; outsmarting the enemy, thinking two steps ahead – enacting power through cerebral application rather than brute strength. In 2014's *Thief*, *Metal Gear Solid V* and – to a lesser extend – *Batman* (who's supposed to be the world's greatest detective), it feels like the idea of stealth is put on the back burner, with bells and whistles jostling for space on the UI, each desperately trying to





EA AND VISCERAL GAMES DECIDE TO DELAY BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE TO 2015 AFTER FEEDBACK FROM THE BETA

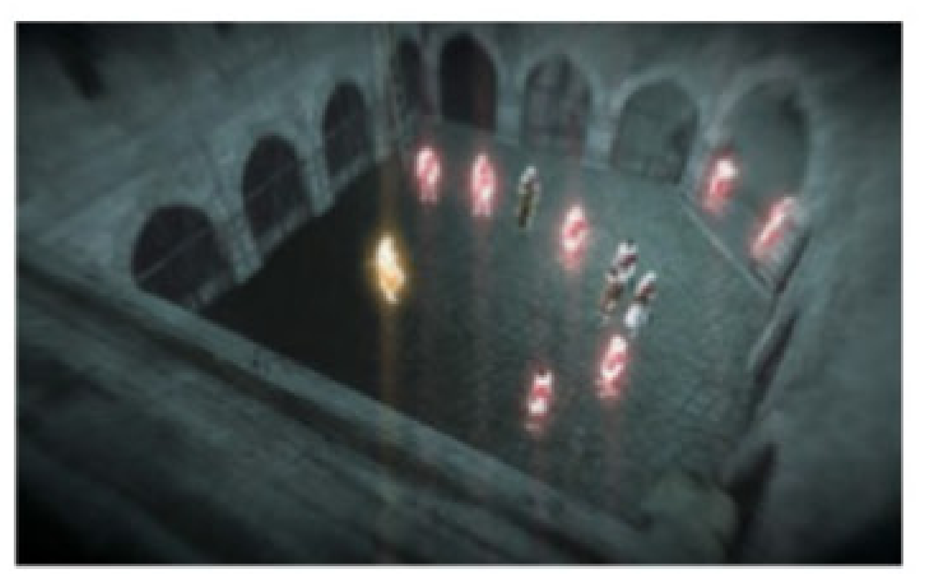


Inset Third-person shooters (*Dead Space* and *BioShock Infinite* are the most notable examples) have started putting in lines that lead you directly to the objective you're after. Whatever happened to a vague arrow clumsily pointing somewhere?

make things easier for you. Put us back in *Deadly Shadow*'s Cradle and let us do our own legwork.

That said, we can't blame developers for incorporating this feature into games. With Metacritic scores hanging in the balance and a wider breadth of gamers to appeal to, it's become almost necessary. Back in the day when you could move up, down, left, right and press A or B, it was much easier to sniff out what you needed to do in any given level without struggling too much, but now a new player coming to the technical powerhouses of the Xbox One or the PS4 could potentially be intimidated if they're thrown in at the deep end, without so much as a tutorial to keep them afloat as they choke on complex mechanics, optional objectives and missable collectables.

There's a middle ground to be explored here – somewhere between *Dark Souls*' brutal difficulty and the *Batman: Arkham* series' everything-on-a-plate detective mode. Czech-Slovakian point-and-click *Machinarium* made you complete an incrementally difficult shoot-em-up mini-game if you wanted to access the in-game walkthrough, for example – a fantastic example of effort versus reward, while still including a mechanic for gamers that got stuck or wanted pointing in the right direction. Not all games can incorporate mini-games like this with ease, of course, but now that we're pushing ever closer into VR, the uncanny valley, fully virtual worlds and complete immersion, something needs to alter the paradigm of easy, developer-led paths through games, and give a little more control back to the player.



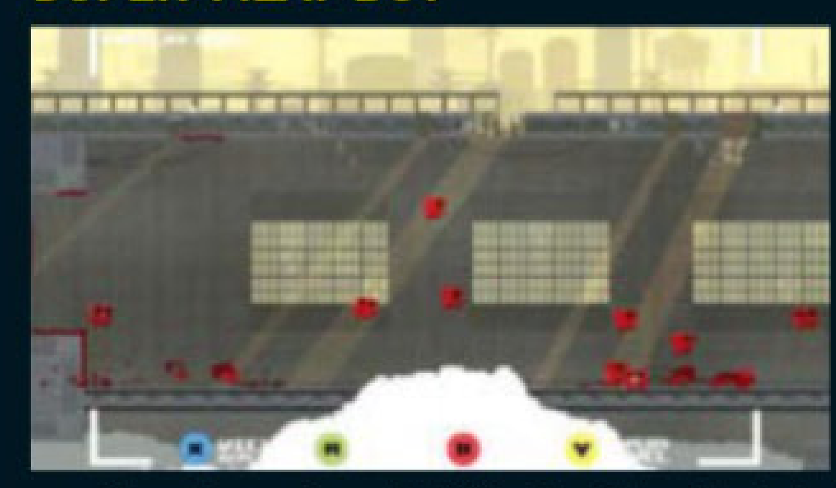
Above Even the first *Assassin's Creed* had 'Eagle Vision'... because looking for the tell-tale Templar insignia is too hard, or something.



GAMES THAT AREN'T GETTING EASIER

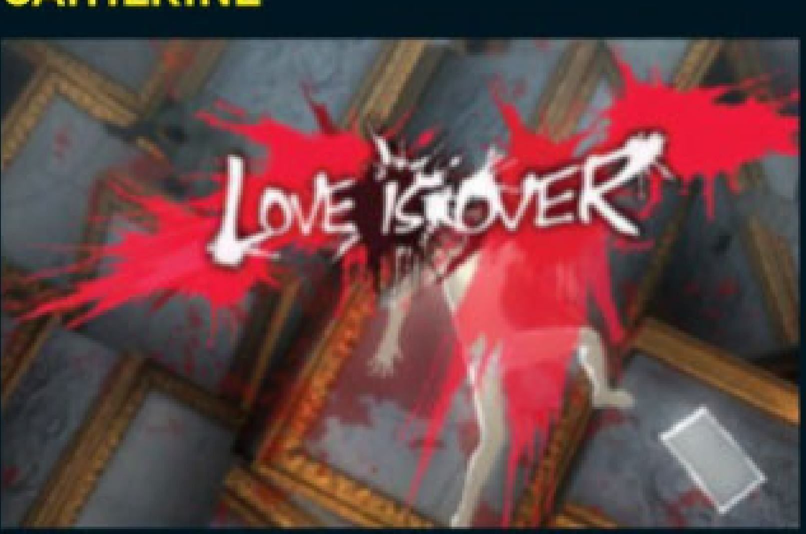
→ We ought to say that not *all* games have made things easy for us – there are still some severe challenges out there

SUPER MEAT BOY



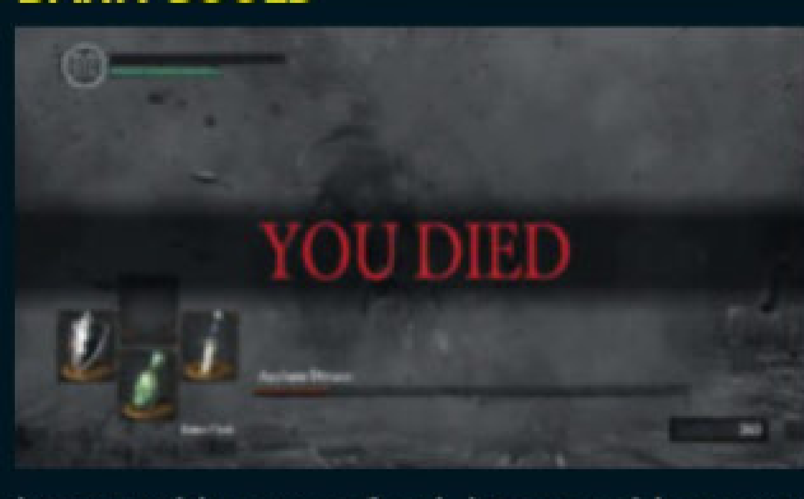
■ It's almost a cliché to include this game in lists like this now, but in this case it's still not been beaten. *Super Meat Boy* proved that hardcore gaming could still be incredibly fun – a line that a lot of difficult titles don't balance very well. If the regular game doesn't prove enough of a masochistic experience for you, the Dark World levels and bonus warp zone are guaranteed to have you pulling your hair out in no time.

CATHERINE



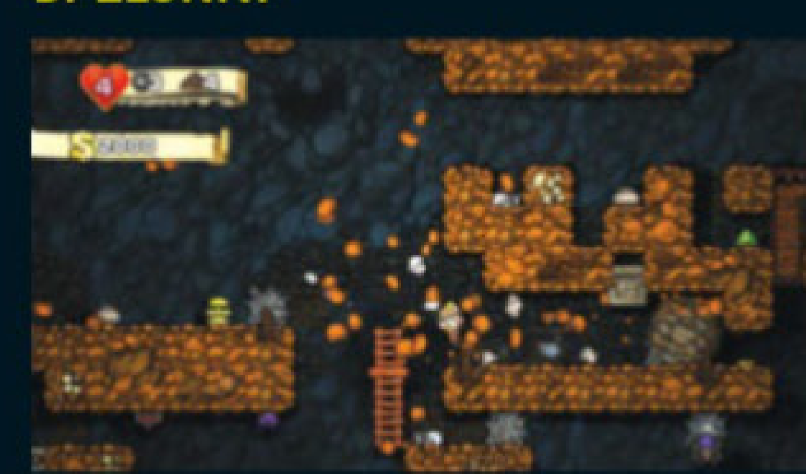
■ Between a gorgeous cel-shaded art style and a fiendishly difficult puzzle-platforming section, *Catherine* managed to make repeatedly splattering your almost-naked body across a series of blocks less frustrating than it should have been through the knowing dialogue that you'd have with NPCs. The Tower of Babel mode is a hardcore gamer's dream: the randomised levels creating a challenge no walkthrough can help you with.

DARK SOULS



■ Another staple entry in these lists, *Dark Souls* is like a friend that keeps taking money off you (and never paying you back), keeps nicking cigarettes off you, keeps taking your food, keeps asking you for favours, but ultimately is still your best friend. Somehow. We anticipate From Software's next project – *Bloodborne* – just to see how masterfully the studio has bumped up the difficulty levels. Start practising those rolls.

SPELUNKY



■ Though someone managed to beat the whole game in under two minutes recently (!), *Spelunky* harks back to the old days of the impossible roguelike, making no illusions that sometimes it'll generate a nigh-on impossible level. It tasks you with improving your own skills, and does it so in an unbearably unforgiving way.



SONY OFFERS FREE GAMES, SERVICES AND FILM/MUSIC DOWNLOADS TO AMERICAN PLAYERS HIT BY PSN HACK



KONGETSU

NOBODY IS THIS LUCKY

Capcom? I'll Buy It At A High Price...



Reports that Capcom had decided not to renew its protection against hostile takeovers exploded onto the internet in a shower of rampant speculation and ill-informed guesswork. What if Nintendo jumps at the chance to secure permanent *Monster Hunter* exclusivity? Or will Sony shell out to reclaim the franchise that single-handedly established the PSP as a viable platform? How about Microsoft? Or EA? Calm down, it's highly unlikely that the majority of major industry players would be able to find the capital for such a high-profile buyout or, more pertinently, that any of them would want to take that risk in the first place.

You see, Capcom hasn't exactly been smart in proving its merits as a global publisher. *Monster Hunter* is a licence to print money in the firm's home territory, sure, and the mobile division seems healthy enough. But repeated failed attempts at western domination display both a lack of understanding of the modern market outside of Japan and arguably a weakness in its arsenal of established IPs. In farming games like *Lost Planet 3* and *DmC* out to external teams, Capcom came across as somewhat desperate, eager to leverage existing brands to sell more 'western-friendly' games while taking them away from the teams that made them so special. Couple this with ill-received new titles (*Remember Me*) and sequels (*Resident Evil*) and it's plain to see why investors are unlikely to be queuing up to acquire this legendary name. Hell, even its vast catalogue of dust-coated old IPs isn't worth all that much these days – the indie boom has seen Inafune's *Mega Man* successor *Mighty No. 9* garner more attention than any core series game did in recent memory, for instance.

While it may not be the cash factory it once was, there's still money in Capcom. *Street Fighter* remains the tournament fighter of choice and even with prettier pretenders rising up to challenge it, it's unlikely to be dethroned commercially. And as much as its own mistakes have highlighted a lack of understanding of the current market, other factors suggest that the business savvy is still there – exclusivity helped rather than harmed *Dead Rising 3* on Xbox One (which boasts a comparable attach rate to PS4 exclusives *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *InFamous: Second Son*) and I don't even want to imagine how much money must have changed hands for Nintendo to bag all main series *Monster Hunter* games since *Portable 3rd*.

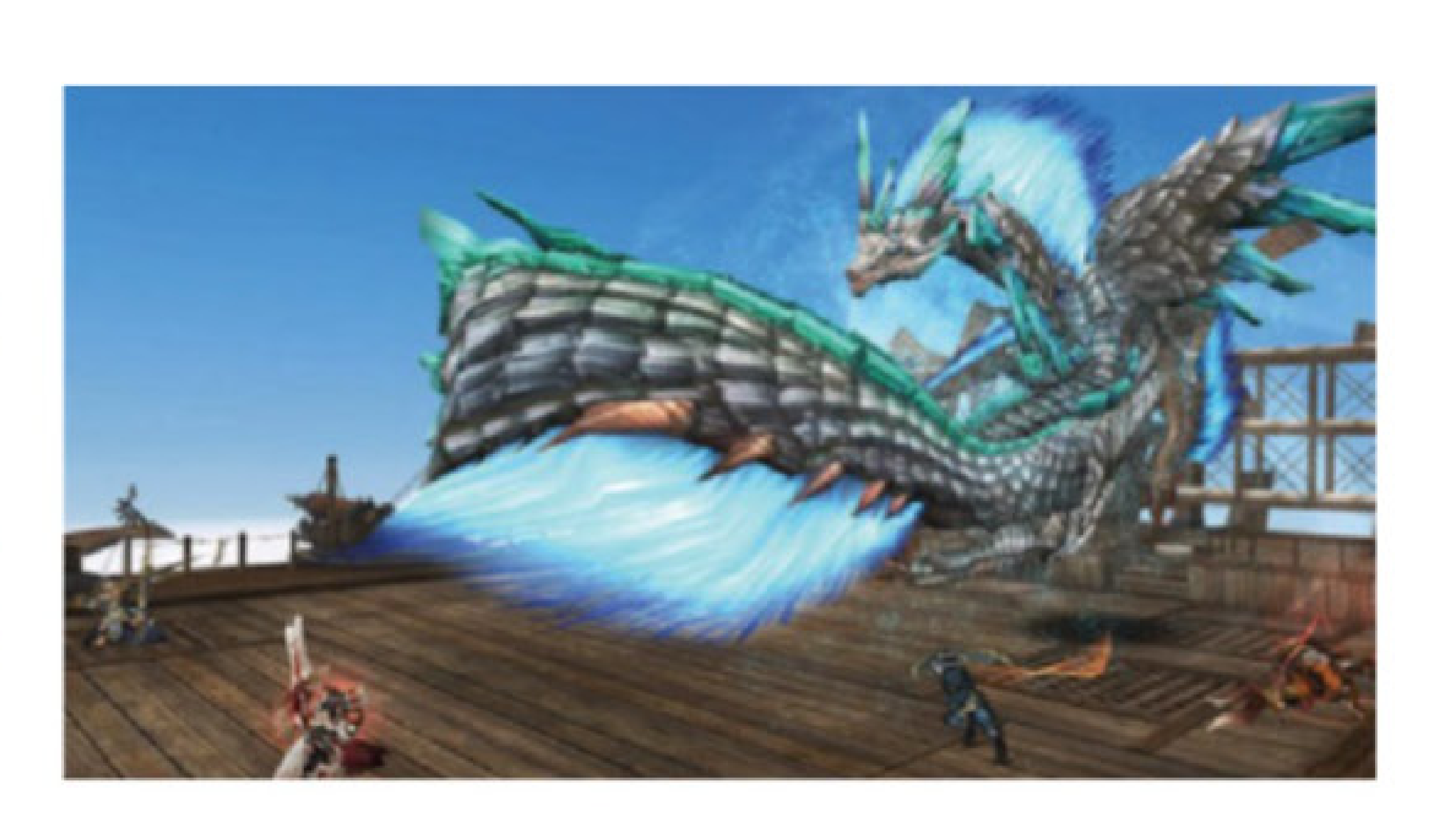
> Capcom hasn't been smart in proving its merits as a global publisher

Major western names like EA and Activision are too focused on the tried-and-tested to take a punt on Capcom, while big Asian online-focused firms such as GungHo and Nexon are unlikely to want to deal with its triple-A baggage. A merger is possible – Sega and Konami are among the few major third-parties without double-barrelled names and their legacy franchises would seem to gel pretty well with Capcom's – but the more likely outcome, in the short term at least, is that it'll be business as usual for Capcom for the foreseeable future. Just don't be surprised if we see the resurgence of the PS2-era importer's market as Capcom looks to cement and grow its home turf advantage before trialling anything other than its biggest brands outside of Japan.

Luke Albigés is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine, a lifelong Capcom fan and never one to turn down an easy reference to Resident Evil 4's merchant



● Vita finally gets a *MonHan* game and what do you know? It's the sketchy pseudo-MMO version that nobody really likes and will never be localised. Sigh. While this might seem like great news for Capcom all the same, it's probably a bigger deal for Sony – sales of the PSP went through the roof with each new hunting game that was released on the platform. We might just wait for *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate*, out next year on 3DS.



ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck

New Order, same old problem



***The New Order* is a damn good shooter. The combat mechanics are satisfying, MachineGames does a very decent job of integrating stealth mechanics and, mysteriously for many, it's got a solid script, voice performances and narrative design. It's this I want to talk about, because it's a bit of a poser. *The New Order* is an alternative history about the Nazis developing supernatural cyborg technology and taking over the world, and it's dark and it's funny in equal measure.**

There's the problem. Nazis aren't funny. Or, at least, you could argue that they should be taken very seriously. The Holocaust is generally regarded as off limits for comedy and, by extension, we ought to be pretty careful with our alternate histories. Now, *The New Order* does take its alternate history very seriously but anchors it all to a gleefully shallow and messy spot of the old ultraviolence. Is this a step too far?

It's fully aware of its ridiculousness, the cartoon levels of gore

I'd argue not. It's not a problem for other media, and so it shouldn't be a problem for us, and especially recently plenty of games are tackling difficult subjects often with a combination of comedy and seriousness. Clearly there's no one-size-fits-all solution. A lot rests on the quality of the writing and on whether the intentions of the developer are clear. *Far Cry 3*, for example, was making a point about the blend of fantasy, escapism and violence in shooters – how successfully it managed this is up for debate, although I think generally it did a pretty good job.

So where does *The New Order* sit on this? You can see it taking the subject matter seriously. There's little moral shading: the Nazis are all utterly evil and the hero is an absolute hero – and in that way it's hardly different to a million war movies and books created over the years (the movie *Downfall*, which pushed viewers into sympathising with Adolf Hitler, is far more problematic if you want to pursue that line of argument). Meeting evil with firepower is hardly politically new or different either, and even chipping away at the moral absolute of the good guys is a frequently used conceit, which makes Bobby Bram driving a car full of high explosives into a Nazi research compound just another instance of the tried and tested ambiguity of hero's sacrifice vs suicide bomber we've seen plenty of times before.

X-Men features a Jewish villain whose personality was forged in the Nazi death camps, which is substantially more ethically and politically complicated than anything in *TNO*. Perhaps the issue is more the flippancy, the escapism, which is not to say films like *X-Men* or *Inglourious Basterds* are not escapism – of course they are – but *The New Order* wears its escapism on its sleeve. It's fully aware of its ridiculousness, the cartoon levels of gore. So perhaps *The New Order* is just honest – it gets how problematic what it does is and embraces its own inherent flaws, trusting the player to understand the implications of the fiction.

It knows it is ludicrous; it gets that it's on really thin ice in terms of offensiveness, but maybe the comedy mitigates that. Maybe it would be more dishonest for it to pretend that this is anything other than big dumb entertainment again raiding and rewriting history for some what-if escapism. But if you're going to damn *Wolfenstein* for what it does, then there's an awful lot of other media you're going to have to throw out too.



■ Would *Wolfenstein* be more controversial if you had to murder Nazis that seemed more human?

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games**™



Five Things About
The Phantom Pain

Every addition to the Metal Gear Solid canon brings more intrigue; even at its most coherent, the sprawling narrative of Kojima's series weaves between various protagonists and cataclysmic events. With the second part of Metal Gear Solid V on the horizon, we take a look at the pressing mysteries at the heart of Kojima's most ambitious game to date

1 Knife symbolism

It's clear that *The Phantom Pain* is a much darker portrayal of the world of *Metal Gear*. Kojima has previously stated that he wanted to tell a visceral war story and those that played *Ground Zeroes* will know that the director hasn't shied away from abject violence in telling his story. However, one motif that keeps appearing is knives; glimmering in the light and focused on at several junctures during the most recent footage, Kojima appears to be using this weapon as either a narrative or symbolic device.

2 Is it all a dream?

Hardly an inspiring narrative twist but there's been some suggestion that the events of *The Phantom Pain* could all be an illusion dreamt up by a comatose Big Boss. The debut footage suggested as much, with images of fiery adversaries on horseback and giant whales crashing through the sky.

3 The new Metal Gear

During the latest footage of *The Phantom Pain*, Big Boss rolls up with Skullface to a hangar, which reveals a new Metal Gear. With a head similar to that of Metal Gear Rex and legs resembling Metal Gear Zeke, it's an entirely new beast. Why Big Boss is surveying the scene with the game's antagonist is another matter entirely, which also leads us to our next point.

4 Big Boss' downfall

Could this be the game where we finally see Big Boss defect? The latest footage has Snake seemingly working alongside Skullface and there's evidence elsewhere that this could be the chapter to reveal the machinations behind one of the biggest mysteries of the entire saga. If that proves to be the case, *The Phantom Pain* could prove to be the most pivotal chapter in the entire *Metal Gear Solid* series.

5 End of the line?

Kojima has often said of past *Metal Gear Solid* games that it was to be his last, but everything is pointing to *The Phantom Pain* fulfilling that promise. With the storyline poised to bring Big Boss' journey full circle – particularly if we're to believe that Liquid and Solid Snake are to make an appearance – this could bring the franchise timeline in line with the first entry. This could be the *MGS* game to end them all.

Where are all the female characters?

→ **While several games are currently making an active effort to be more diverse, attempting to forgo the use of lazy stereotypes or character archetypes, it's no secret that women in videogames are still woefully underrepresented. With that in mind, we cast our sights back, asking you for the most well-realised examples of female characters, and what the industry can do about this**

Honestly? I think any protag where you can choose gender and appearance. Allows players to avoid sexist nonsense, if they want. For me the real issue is that male protags are considered the default. Nice to see more big games lead with default female. Games should concentrate less on writing 'a woman' and more on 'writing a good character who is a woman'.
@gingerkytten, Twitter

BioWare always does a great job with its female leads. As does Bethesda.
@pressxtoskip, Twitter

Always found Sheik and Samus interesting as they reversed the assumption that all protagonists were male. Strong female leads too.
@martynstuff, Twitter

Lara Croft had a big impact on me as a kid. She was strong, adventurous and I wanted to be exactly like her.
@RocketMinx, Twitter

I was always a fan of Nilin from *Remember Me.* Never felt like her being a woman was used as a plot point, which was nice.
@the_spad, Twitter

As far as role models go, Jade is an all-time favourite but I also liked Nilin from *Remember Me.* The most realistic and believable representation should go to Ellie from *The Last of Us,* though.
Joël Hartmann, Facebook

Ellie, Commander Shepard and Hawke are the most notable highlights to me. And BioWare typically do a better job on their female leads than their male ones.
@IainOakley, Twitter




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STEELSERIES H WIRELESS HEADSET
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Destructoid.com
"The H Wireless is an excellent wireless headset that is feature-rich and thoughtfully designed."
examiner.com
"The SteelSeries H Wireless Headset is well worth every penny you might pay for it"
gamingillustrated.com
STEELSERIES.COM/HWIRELESS
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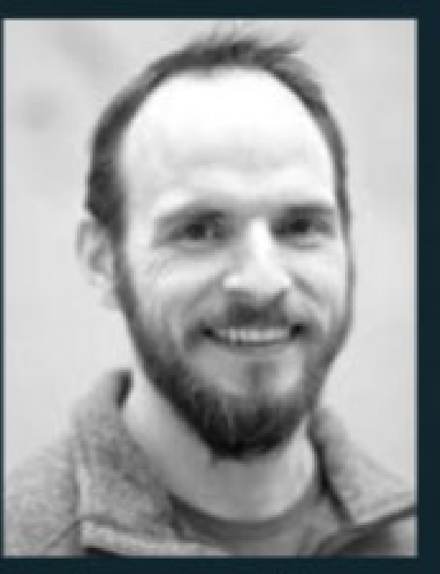
END OF THE KNIGHT

The final part in Rocksteady's Arkham series, Batman: Arkham Knight has Batman stepping into Gotham City to face his greatest threat in the Arkham Knight himself. games™ talks to director Sefton Hill about bringing an end to the Bat

ROCKSTEADY IS AN OPERATION THAT VALUES AGGRESSIVE EXPANSION. Edging along the rafters that link Gotham City's rain-stricken rooftops in *Arkham Knight* – the studio's latest adaptation of Bob Kane's vigilante, and alleged final act in Rocksteady's trilogy – games™ peers out over the conurbation as it stretches for miles into the darkness, finding a world almost unrecognisable from its origins.

After the titular prison husk where Batman stalked its inmates and the cordoned-off area of city hastily abandoned and left to disintegrate, here stands a sprawling metropolis stripped of its shackles and brought to life. This *is* Gotham City. It's an impressive sight to behold. But before we let Batman spread his wings, we cast our eye across the skyline, noting the incandescent hue of artificial light illuminating the financial district on the far side of the map. Gothic structures pierce the skyline and neon street signs splash lurid colour across an otherwise oppressively dark air (and perhaps offer the only homage to Joel Schumacher's contribution to *Batman* lore).

It's impressive, given that the location has appeared in various guises over the course of three games (including last year's *Arkham Origins*), that Gotham retains its allure; the streets tinged with mystery and sadness, its shadows concealing another iconic villain, its denizens mostly routine thugs ready for a good kicking. Everything is bigger. Much bigger. The city has evolved, the dangers have escalated and Rocksteady has aggressively expanded. No more half-measures: this is the Batman game you've been waiting for.



Sefton Hill
Arkham Knight director

"We've always had the philosophy that little details are what makes a game truly immersive," says director Sefton Hill. "I think that's one of the strengths of our earlier games. We've finally got the chance to show what the whole of Gotham City looks like in the Arkhamverse, and it's huge: full of massive skyscrapers, dark grimy alleyways and glaring neon. And rain – we've spent a lot of time making the rain feel just right! The sun hardly ever shines in Gotham, and switching to new-gen consoles has made it possible for us to bring that unique atmosphere to life in a way that hasn't been done before in gaming."

The setting is reassuringly familiar, but the tools with which it's created are completely new. Hill has served as director on each of Rocksteady's entries (while also sharing writing duties on *City* and *Knight*), but finds himself in a adventitious position working on *Knight*, able to utilise the extra power of new-gen platforms to build a bigger, better experience that wasn't possible a few years ago.

"The [new technology] has given us the chance to apply our detailed approached to a much bigger open world," he tells games™. "Our version of Gotham is teeming with life. While it has been evacuated, it has been completely occupied by the gangs of Gotham, and the Arkham Knight's militia army. There are also many more of Gotham's Most Wanted who've crawled out of the woodwork in this »

co-ordinated attack to bring the Batman to his knees." In *Arkham Knight*, Hill has a larger canvas by which to paint a suitably epic finale for his own take on the character. With the whole of Gotham to discover, is Rocksteady's swansong the *Batman* game the studio always wanted to make?

"Ever since *Batman: Arkham Asylum* our approach has been to put everything we have into every game we make," says Hill. "We never hold ideas back because you never know what's around the corner. So I guess you could describe that as a 'kitchen sink' approach but I'd prefer to say it's more of a 'live every game as if it's your last' approach… mainly because it sounds more poetic."

"Are you happy now?" growls the Joker, his lanky frame crawling cross the ground as the life leaves his body. "You want to know something funny?" answers his archrival, the two coming face-to-face for the last time. "Even after everything you've done… I would have saved you." A last wheezing laugh emerges from the dying clown as Rocksteady daringly brings closure to one of the most iconic rivalries in contemporary fiction. The studio seals the fate of Batman's greatest foe with both poignancy and no shortage of appropriate irony. "That actually is… pretty funny…"

"'Oh crap, how do we top that?'" laughs Hill. "That's usually the first thing you think when you finish a game. It's funny, with a couple of weeks holiday and a bit of perspective, the ideas start flowing."

FOLLOWING OVER 9 MILLION UNITS SOLD, HILL DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO RELAX BEFORE THE STUDIO SET TO WORK ON A FOLLOW-UP TO *ARKHAM CITY*. Using the death of the Joker as a jumping off point, Hill alongside an in-house writing team (*Arkham Knight* is the first game not to involve renowned Batman writer Paul Dini) penned a story that sees Gotham descended into chaos. Scarecrow returns in the absence of the Clown Prince of Crime, joined by the likes of Penguin, Two-Face and Harley Quinn, all working together to wage war on Gotham and finally take down the Dark Knight. Batman is at the peak of his powers but to deal with the escalated threat, he has to adapt. To establish this on a gameplay level, Rocksteady spent time finding ways to improve existing systems without overcomplicating them, or changing what people enjoyed in the first place.

You'll still be gliding between buildings, grappling onto gargoyles and swooping down onto unsuspecting enemies, but Hill knew that *Arkham Knight* needed to take Batman beyond his own physical abilities. "At the back of my mind was always the thought of introducing the iconic Batmobile," says Hill. "But to be completely honest, at the start we did consider whether we actually needed it. I mean, gliding around in *Arkham City* was great fun, so why bother with a car?"

> "YOU COULD SEE THE ARKHAM KNIGHT AS A RESULT OF THE ESCALATION THAT INEVITABLY FOLLOWS BATMAN'S QUEST FOR JUSTICE"
> SEFTON HILL, ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS

ROCKSTEADY DROPPED A PROTOTYPE OF THE BATMOBILE INTO THE EXISTING *ARKHAM CITY* MAP TO TEST ITS FUNCTIONALITY BEFORE COMMITTING TO MAKING IT A MORE PROMINENT PART OF THE ARKHAMVERSE. It was a complete failure: the claustrophobic and tight layout of the city left barely any room for the Batmobile to manoeuvre effectively around the space, while height restrictions didn't leave much room for Batman to eject himself above the streets.

"When we started designing our version of Gotham City, we knew we wanted it to feel like a completely natural setting for Batman and the Batmobile to exist in," Hill reveals, highlighting to us the wider roads and increased verticality that makes exploration a high-octane thrill from behind the wheel. "For us, that means creating an environment that's fun to navigate in all of the ways that Batman uses to get around: grappling and gliding over the skyline, running over rooftops, brawling through the alleyways, or tearing through the streets in the Batmobile. Gameplay always comes first for us, so, for the first time we have set the game in the heart of Gotham City, which is perfect for Batman to show off all of his abilities."

Of course plenty of Kapow! and Biff! will still be on the menu, but despite the Dark Knight's aptitude in a fistfight and the strength of his armour, he'll often be overwhelmed by swarms of enemies – particularly those armed as heavily as he is. As the Scarecrow plots to unleash a deadly toxin across the city and the titular Arkham Knight is leading his own militia against the Caped Crusader, the Batmobile isn't just a mode of transport but a necessary weapon in the fight against overwhelming odds.

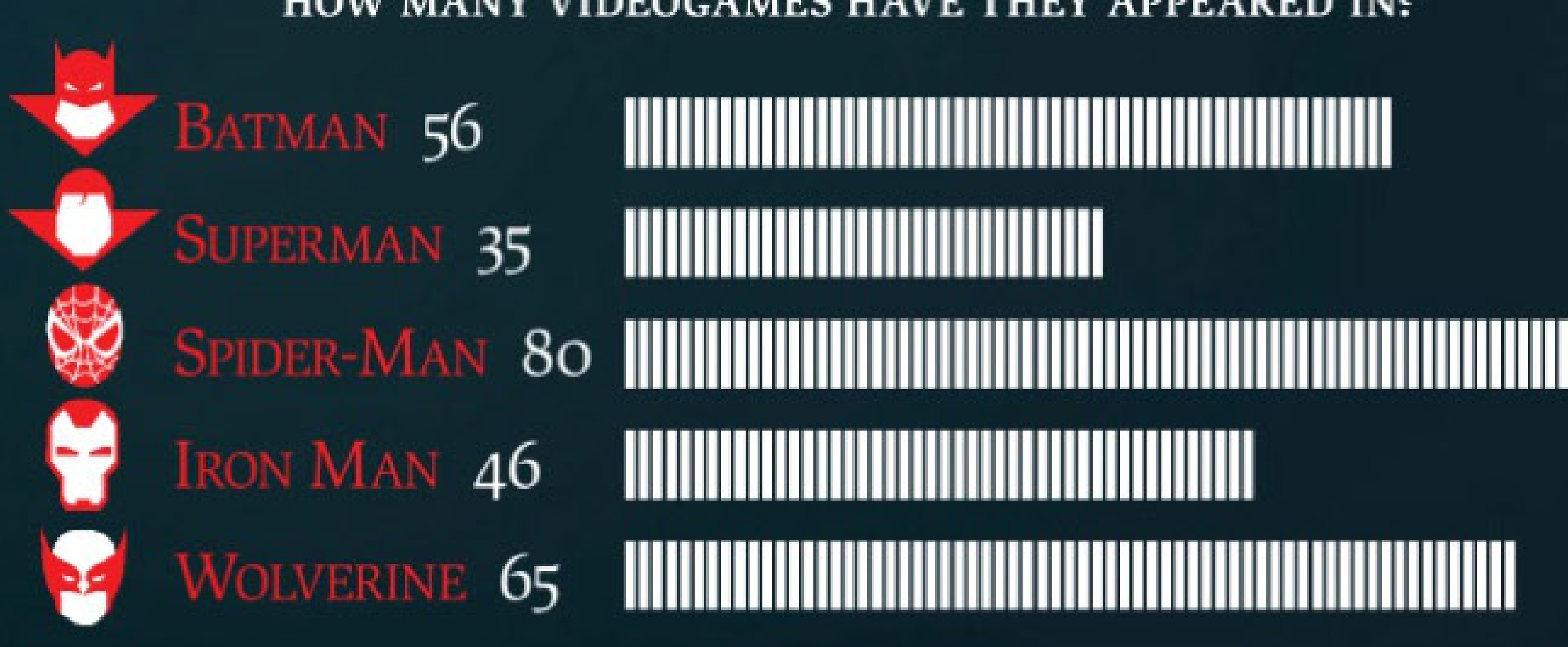
"The symbiosis between man and machine is a vital aspect of *Batman: Arkham Knight*," says Hill. "Batman and the Batmobile enhance each other's abilities in a wide range of ways, and they interact in a way that makes the Batmobile feel like another playable character. It's a totally iconic vehicle, but it's also Batman's most powerful and versatile gadget."

Batman's foes will get a shock if they approach the Batmobile with malicious intent – it emits a defensive electric shock to protect it from vandals – while it's also loaded with a series of offensive abilities that include firing nonlethal missiles and a tank mode that can take out armoured vehicles.

"From a gameplay perspective, we've worked hard to ensure that the Batmobile opens up a massive variety of new things to do, whether it's in combat, exploration, navigation or problem solving," says Hill. "We want it to feel unlike any other vehicle that's ever been in a game, and like an extension of the Dark Knight himself." Despite his scepticism in previous entries to include Batman's ride, now Hill can't separate one from the other. "When you try it, you'll see what a difference it makes," he beams. "I am probably most proud of how

EARTH'S MIGHTIEST VIRTUAL HEROES

SUPERHEROES GO HEAD-TO-HEAD IN THE GREATEST BATTLE OF ALL: HOW MANY VIDEOGAMES HAVE THEY APPEARED IN?





The Batmobile isn't just a mode of transport for The Caped Crusader but an ally in battle against the thugs littering the streets of Gotham City.

With the increased verticality comes slight tweaks to the gliding mechanics. The biggest of which is the height at which Batman can launch himself.

The Arkham Knight's own militia is heavily armed. Tanks that roam the streets will pose a greater challenge to Batman than knife-wielding fiends.



» we have managed to integrate the Batmobile into all of the core systems of the game, improving all of the components that made it fun in the first place. When I play the game now, I wonder how we ever did without it."

Batman chases a hooded figure, bathed in shadow across the rooftops of Gotham. "I bring a message: dark days are coming, Batman," warns a portentous voice when the Caped Crusader catches the mysterious character. "The Prophecy is coming true, you are the warrior who will close the gates of Hell, you are the one who will save this day," he continues, the shrouded harbinger of doom almost a mirror to the Dark Knight. His final words are a morbid warning that the night is about to get darker. "…and in doing so, events will occur that you cannot stop. From the ashes of Arkham, the fires will rage and Gotham will burn. And you, you will burn too."

Hill claims that Rocksteady never had an overarching plan for the *Arkham* franchise, despite the fact that the series often alluded to grander thematic ambitions beneath each chapter's standalone tales. A hidden room in Arkham Asylum concealed plans for Arkham City's larger penitentiary, while a nondescript barge floating in one of Gotham's flooded districts in the first sequel revealed that Scarecrow was concocting a revenge plot. These cryptic clues would serve as broad concepts that would then be fleshed out as the studio moved onto the next project. However, Hill admits that it was hard having to hold back a few ideas for the potential pay-off further down the line.

"There's a good few hooks in *Batman: Arkham City* that pay off in *Batman: Arkham Knight*," he says of the various relationships Batman has with Arkham's inmates. "And then there's the Scarecrow himself, who has been planning this moment since Killer Croc attacked him in the sewers of Arkham Asylum. He has always been one of our favourite characters at Rocksteady, so while it was tempting to bring him back for *Batman: Arkham City*, we decided to give him a game off so that we could bring him back with a vengeance for *Batman: Arkham Knight*." After two games with the Joker as the primary villain and the majority of Batman's rogues gallery appearing in some guise, Rocksteady found to its surprise that the break away from Scarecrow re-energised the studio. "The Scarecrow is a fascinating character to write for," says Hill. "He challenges Batman in unique ways and knows how to use one of the Dark Knight's own weapons just as well as he does."

Scarecrow isn't a straightforward adversary. Like the Joker, he uses psychological games to get the better of the Batman, but Scarecrow manipulates Batman's perception of the world

"SCARECROW HIMSELF IS A MASTER OF FEAR AND MISDIRECTION. HE PLAYS PERFECTLY TO THE STRENGTHS OF THE KIND OF UNPREDICTABLE STORIES WE LIKE TO TELL"
SEFTON HILL, ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS

DR. HARLEEN FRANCES QUINZEL

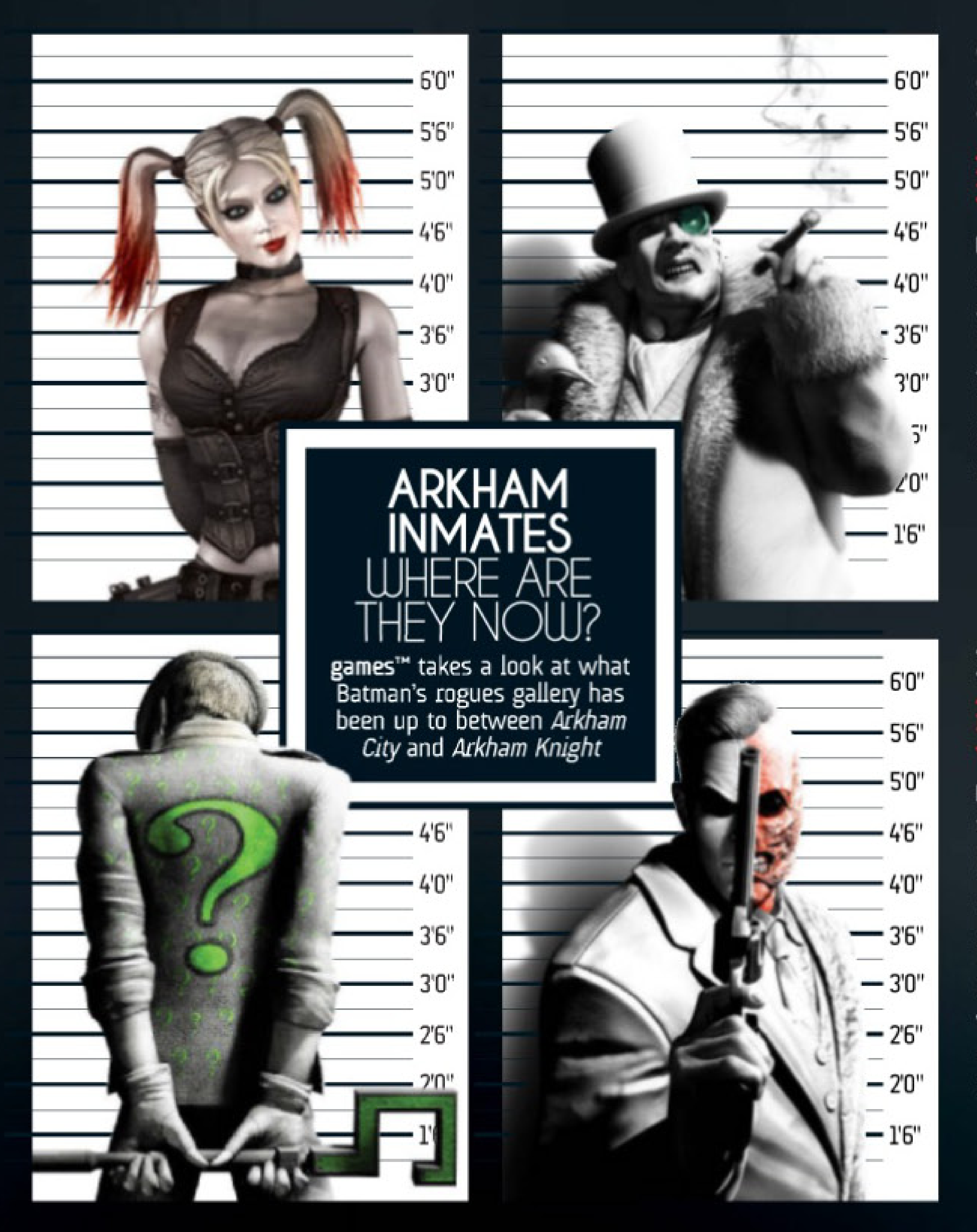
Alias: Harley Qinn
Height: 5ft 7in
Weight: 130 lbs

■ A PSYCHIATRIST assigned to treat the Joker at Arkham Asylum, she became obsessed with her patient, literally falling madly in love with him. Since the Joker's death she's become deranged, hell-bent on avenging the death of her love. This has led her to aid Scarecrow in his plan to destroy Gotham on Halloween night.

OSWALD CHESTERFIELD COBBLEPOT

Alias: Penguin
Height: 4ft 10in
Weight: 175 pounds

■ AN ECCENTRIC CRIMINAL mastermind whose trick umbrellas are as notorious as his shady business dealings. He has since stepped up his arms trade to heavily weaponise Gotham's criminal underworld, aiding their united bid to bring down Batman.



ARKHAM INMATES WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

games™ takes a look at what Batman's rogues gallery has been up to between *Arkham City* and *Arkham Knight*

EDWARD NASHTON

Alias: Riddler
Height: 6ft 1in
Weight: 183 lbs

■ WITH A GENIUS-level intellect and an unfortunate obsession with the World's Greatest Detective, Riddler is determined to beat Batman in a game of wits. In what might be his last intellectual game with the Dark Knight, he has dug beneath the streets of Gotham and created the ultimate physical and mental challenge for his greatest opponent.

HARVEY DENT

Alias: Two-Face
Height: 6ft
Weight: 182lbs

■ A STRONG ally of Batman who turned enemy after his face was horribly scarred by acid. Batman has proven a nuisance to Two-Face during his time in Arkham, but Dent is more concerned with killing Catwoman – a rivalry that will no doubt come to a head during the seizure of Gotham on Halloween night.

around him. *Arkham Asylum*'s abstract nightmare chapter – which had Batman reliving the nightmare of his parent's death, while also navigating through a horrific maze of tombstones – was celebrated for subverting the game's structure up to that point. Does the sack-faced illusionist have what it takes to cut it as the lead antagonist?

"Scarecrow's new role suits him perfectly," responds Hill. "As he becomes the puppet master for the events that unfold over the course of *Batman: Arkham Knight*. We spend a huge amount of time working out ways to keep players on the edge of their seat, and the Scarecrow himself is a master of fear and misdirection. As a character, the Scarecrow plays perfectly to the strengths of the kind of unpredictable stories we like to tell in our games." With that in mind, can players expect more surprises akin to his mind-altering appearance in *Arkham Asylum*? Will players be able to trust what they see at all? "I reckon we've already answered this one," Hill wryly answers.

> "We want the Batmobile to feel unlike any other vehicle that's ever been in a game, and like an extension of the Dark Knight himself"
> Sefton Hill, Rocksteady Studios

It's often been said that the villains in *Batman* fiction are more interesting than the hero himself. And if there's cause for concern it's that Rocksteady has expended the best of Batman's utility belt of iconic characters. With Joker gone and Penguin, Riddler and Two-Face having been dealt hard justice at the hands of Batman once or twice before (not to mention the litany of C-list characters that appear) is Rocksteady worried about treading over old ground? "One of the great things about writing for the *Batman* universe is the enormous cast of unique characters that we can draw on," says Hill. "The rogues gallery is great fun to work with, and we love including a mixture of villains in our games. They each have their own personality, strengths and weaknesses, and we've always paid them the respect they deserve so they can translate into unique gameplay and situations."

One thing the studio has learned is that every single character that has ever appeared in a *Batman* story comes with their own legion of fans. This represents a double-edged sword of sorts for the studio: the ingrained knowledge of each character's behaviour and their relationship to the Bat, not to mention the majority of twists already being widely known. If the studio really wants to surprise gamers it'd have to reach outside of Batman's world. (Although, not into the wider DC Universe: "There's so much awesome history in the Batman. We've got more than enough to work with in Gotham!"). The answer, then, is its own character as a focal point for Batman's fight against evil. In the Arkham Knight, Batman has finally met his match.

"You are the product of everything you fear," rasps Scarecrow, addressing Batman from a hideout located somewhere in Gotham. "Violence, darkness, helplessness… All that remains is for you to watch as I drag your beloved Gotham into oblivion." He dispatches his latest agent of chaos. Clad in tight black armour, the Arkham 'A' branded on his chestplate, small ears reaching from his mask. The Arkham Knight is a villain Batman has never faced before: himself. Scarecrow issues a warning: "I will unleash your greatest fears."

"The Arkham Knight was conceived to be a dark reflection of Batman," says Hill of the studio's original creation for the game. »

"From his uniform, you can see that he has a military connection – he controls the army of unmanned drones that is threatening Gotham – but there's more to it than that. By creating his own militarised version of the batsuit, Arkham Knight is waging his own psychological war against Batman himself. He's aiming to exploit the Dark Knight's fears just as much as the Scarecrow."

The two are actually working in unison to bring down the Bat. To defeat him, Scarecrow has sent an enemy that can equal Batman. This ice-toned warrior has a bulky frame and fast reflexes, highly-skilled in hand-to-hand combat and packing serious firepower. But what's more dangerous is that the Arkham Knight appears to have a personal tie to Batman, a reason for his hated against a desperate Gotham's saviour.

VERY LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE CHARACTER. What information Batman finds on the streets of Gotham is mere hearsay, while hacker genius Oracle has trouble pinning an identity to the elusive copycat. And it's clear that his quest to kill Batman borders on fanatical. We watch as he takes aim at Batman with an attack helicopter, attempting to snuff out the Dark Knight himself. The plot is foiled when the Scarecrow disarms the aircraft's weapon systems (presumably he's not done with Batman yet).

There are multiple theories on who the mystery assailant could be: Jason Todd (the second Robin. In the Arkhamverse canon he was killed by the Joker shortly after the events of *Arkham Asylum*), Hush (who we see remodelling his face to take on the form of Bruce Wayne at the end of *Arkham City*), or even just a figment of Batman's imagination. We doubt it's that last one, but this is an entry to the *Arkham* series that we've already seen will have a strong psychological effect on Batman, so we simply don't know what to expect.

"His identity is… the Arkham Knight," smiles Hill, reluctant to give any clue. Still, what he can offer us is an insight into the design process, as Rocksteady worked closely with DC to build the character. "Working with DC Entertainment to create a brand new character was incredible," enthuses Hill. "We worked closely together to define and refine the Arkham Knight into a unique personality that fits perfectly within the *Batman: Arkham* canon, but also makes sense in the broader DC universe. As a team, it's incredibly exciting to have the chance to contribute one of our own creations to the Batman universe."

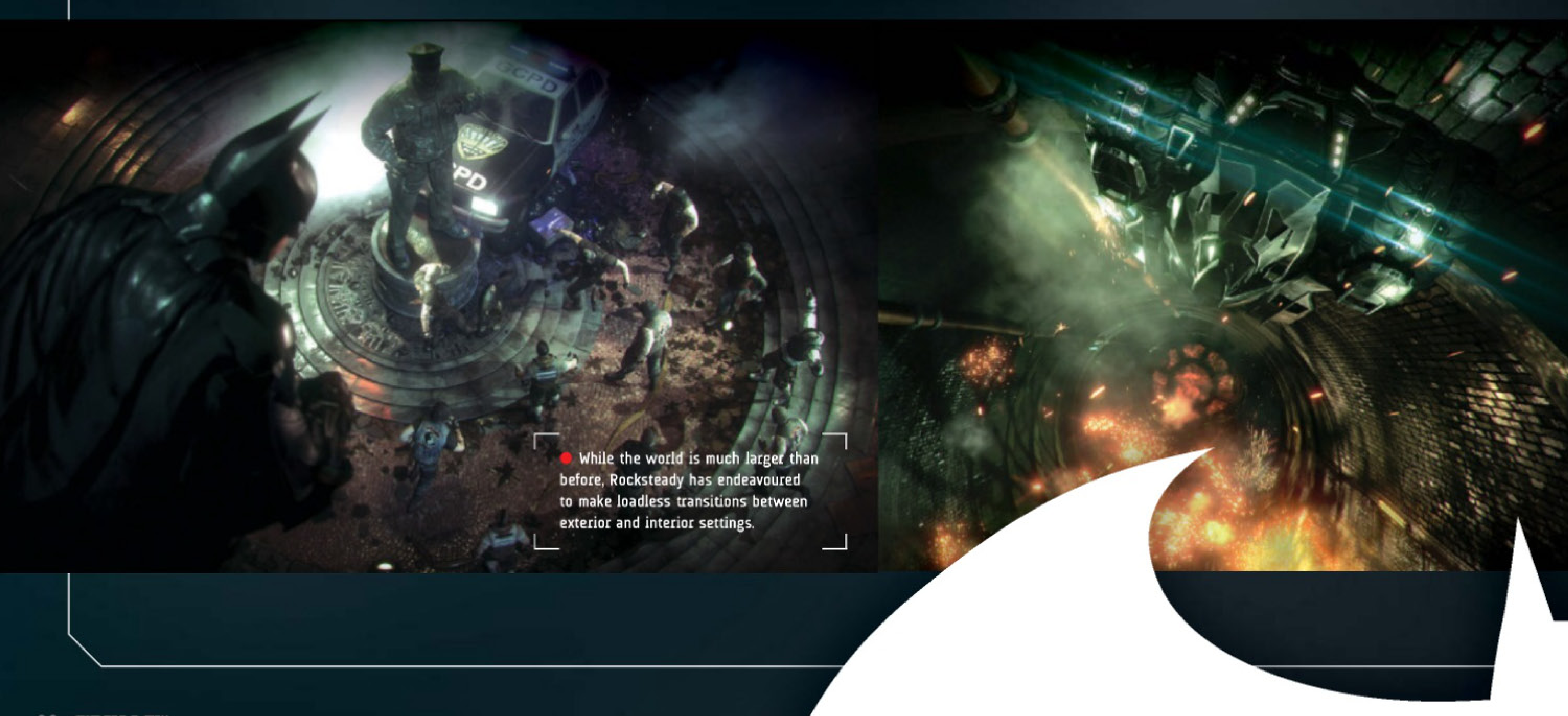
In that regard he presents an interesting question: if Joker challenged Batman's ideologies, Bane his strength and the Riddler his intellect, what sort of opposition does the Arkham Knight represent? "You could see the Arkham Knight as a result of the escalation that inevitably follows Batman's quest for justice," muses Hill. "As Batman hones his abilities and puts criminals under more pressure, his enemies naturally turn to more extreme methods, increasing the stakes every time they face him. The Arkham Knight is the apex of that escalation: as an individual, he's using Batman's own strategies against him, and as a commander, he's bringing an army of drone tanks into Gotham City to enact a full-scale military occupation."

> "SWITCHING TO NEW-GEN CONSOLES HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO BRING GOTHAM TO LIFE IN A WAY THAT HASN'T BEEN DONE BEFORE IN GAMING"
> SEFTON HILL, ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS

Hill further describes the Arkham Knight as a "master tactician" who commands a massive force of infantry and vehicles, exploiting his enemies' weaknesses. There's one thing for certain from what we've seen, and that is that it's a battle on a scale unlike anything in the series to date.

Over the course of three titles the *Arkham* series has gone from a taut stealth-centric action title, evolving to a compact open-world in its sequel. The expansion is impressively aggressive: a sprawling open-world city to traverse that pits Batman against his toughest enemy yet. Hill remains humble about the challenge that the studio face. "Our core philosophy is actually pretty simple – it's the same now as it was when we started work on *Batman: Arkham Asylum* eight years ago," he concludes. "We've always set out to create games that are fun to play, have lasting depth and, of course, make you *feel* like you're the Batman. That informs every single design decision we make."

Batman: Arkham Knight will be released on PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One in 2015.



While the world is much larger than before, Rocksteady has endeavoured to make loadless transitions between exterior and interior settings.

Creating the Arkham Knight

LEAD CHARACTER ARTIST ALBERT FELIU OFFERS INSIGHT INTO ROCKSTEADY'S TITULAR VILLAIN, THE ARKHAM KNIGHT, A BRAND NEW CHARACTER



MASK

"The mask is a vital component of many super villains, and we needed the Arkham Knight's helmet to achieve a range of different things. Firstly, it needs to cover his face in order to conceal any sense of the man underneath. Next, it provides him with a detailed heads-up display that keeps track of his forces moving throughout Gotham City. This information is projected across the inside of his visor, creating the illusion of those inhuman eyes and giving him a face that is equal parts ghostly and robotic."

CHEST PLATE

"The Arkham Knight knows the deep influence that the events of both *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* had on Batman, and by making the logo of the institution into his own, he aims to put Gotham's saviour at a disadvantage. The angular design of the armour plating was influenced by the A-shape of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*'s logo, but it's also designed to deflect the bat claw."

GAUNTLETS

"The materials are influenced by the design of fighter aircraft: highly resistant, unreflective and totally intimidating. The Arkham Knight's knowledge of the Caped Crusader influences his fighting style, and so his gauntlets fulfil a similar role to Batman's: they're armoured so he can use them to repel opponents with blades while remaining light enough to enable rapid strikes."

THE EARS

"The ears serve two purposes: first, they act as transmitters relaying the Arkham Knight's commands to his troops and drones in the field. Secondly, they are his greatest psychological attack on Batman: while they're much shorter and more streamlined than the Dark Knight's, (to make them more practical for combat), this design is an intentional mockery of Batman and everything that he stands for."

The Arkham Knight is one of the centrepiece villains. He's like a dark reflection of Batman, and commands a military force that's taken control of Gotham City. He seems to know everything about the Batman: his tactics, gadgets and weaknesses. He has used this knowledge to create an identity that mocks the Dark Knight and creates a striking image on the battlefield that inspires his army and terrifies his enemies.

CAMOUFLAGE

"In creating the image of this military leader invading an urban space, we designed the Arkham Knight's red camouflage pattern to make him identifiable to his troops, but also to take advantage of how Gotham City looks at night: the dark greys interspersed with dashes of red enable him to remain concealed in Gotham's alleyways and on its rooftops. The dark material that armours his biceps and triceps is partially reflective, working as part of the camouflage."

THE UTILITY BELT

"The Arkham Knight is a military commander; he's also a highly capable and resourceful warrior just like Batman. His utility belt is designed for more personal confrontations, and it reflects his aggressive personality: he wears it low-slung in contrast with Batman's more regimented approach to field equipment. He thinks he's better, badder and definitely cooler than the Batman himself."



WHY I ♥...

Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons

GUILLAUME CERDA, ASSOCIATE PRODUCER, UBISOFT MONTPELLIER

"I cried. I have to say, I cried when I played this game. It was a huge influence when you look at Valiant Hearts. *We were trying to put together an emotional game and it was a pleasure to see another studio – Starbreeze – manage to do that too with* Brothers. *The game design is something new, and super interesting, and that's why I originally brought the game. But when I sat down to play it, straight from the start, it affected me with its story. I don't want to spoil the ending, but it's genius. It's something I've never seen in a game before."*



"I don't want to spoil the ending, but it's genius. It's something I've never seen in a game before"

GUILLAUME CERDA, ASSOCIATE PRODUCER, UBISOFT MONTPELLIER



"We absolutely plan for Destiny to be a world that grows over time. Hopefully people will like it enough that we get the opportunity to help it keep growing"

HAROLD RYAN PRESIDENT, BUNGIE



Destiny

CONCEPT ■ A 'shared world shooter' that fuses FPS, MMO and RPG elements to create an always-online game with an incredible sense of scale.

Of moon wizards, server strain and good times

The saddest part about the downfall of humanity according to *Destiny* isn't how we lose control of our own home planet. It isn't how we lose our friends and family. It isn't even, as science fiction loves to preach, how our end is ultimately brought about by our own greed and overly rapid expansion into unknown territories. It's how quickly we apparently run out of ideas.

Case in point: the now-infamous 'that wizard came from the moon' line muttered by Peter Dinklage in the alpha version of the game. It's a bad line, sure, but not all that much more ridiculous than many of the others the game spits – the issue is one of context. When the rest of the world sees your game as a gun-heavy MMO in space and is casually throwing around terms like 'space wizard' to describe its characters, it's probably not in the best interests of credibility to have literal space wizards floating around and being called out as just that. Sci-fi and fantasy properties have been creating new names for just about every trope going since their formative years, so to revert to terms like 'wizard' here is poor form. And even though that meme-friendly line won't make it into the final game (unless Bungie elects to pull another about-face and run with it, 'arrow to the knee' style), the wizards are here to stay.

/// The real shame here is that in most other aspects, *Destiny* is about as forward-thinking and original as a modern shooter can realistically be. Bringing together the rock-solid gunplay that made *Halo* a household name, *Borderlands*' insanely popular co-op loot grind formula, the social elements of MMO townships and some clever takes on the antics of modern online innovators like the *Souls* games, *Destiny* is a game that seems ready to collapse under the weight of its own ambition, not unlike the fate that befell the human empire it depicts. But Bungie clearly has no such intentions and every pillar of the game holds firm – considering it's still in beta at the time of writing, *Destiny* has no right to be as polished or robust as it is.

It wasn't the most promising of starts, either. The mad rush to get in on the beta ended up crippling PSN but to Bungie's credit, offering three beta keys per redemption was an incredibly smart move in terms of stress testing – many likely only pre-ordered for this early access opportunity, sure, but those extra numbers probably rival those that will be brought in by the aggressive marketing and positive word of mouth over the next month or so, so launch is likely to be similarly busy. While Sony's infrastructure may not have been comfortable with so many people accessing the store to redeem codes at once, it must be said that Bungie's end of the deal held up admirably. Matchmaking and latency both performed far better than the flimsy front-of-house performance would have suggested and again, for a game in this early stage, it was an impressive online showing.

/// That's just as well too, since as much as Bungie seems to be desperate to avoid calling the game an MMO, *Destiny*'s always-online requirement is just the first of many signs that it may be far closer to that blanket term than pre-launch evasion has suggested. Not so much massively multiplayer as 'moderately' or 'modestly' perhaps, but the influence is still clear – social hubs are packed with faction NPCs while players pass time by dancing, pointing and waving at friends and strangers alike. We even saw a game of Duck, Duck, Goose going on.

Even if you decide to go at Destiny relatively solo, when out in the field, you're seldom alone, with other players and groups common sights in story missions, exploration sorties and even instanced co-op Strikes. While exploring, freeform public missions occur from time to time as they might in any MMO worth its salt – we can see why Bungie would want to distance itself from a genre not famed for the accessibility an FPS needs to compete in the top flight these days but if we were Bungie and actively trying to avoid comparisons to the likes of *World Of Warcraft* and *Final Fantasy XIV* (even when they're relatively accurate),

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Bungie
Players: 1-12
Release: 9 September
Genre: FPS

Developer Profile

Ever since it was instrumental in bring the console FPS experience in line with PC, Bungie has been as consistently impressive as any other developer in the field. Destiny marks the firm's first real opportunity to showcase this ability on a cross-platform level as the team leaves the safety of Xbox exclusivity behind in search of a brave new world.

Developer History

Halo 3
2007 [Xbox 360]
Halo: Combat Evolved
2001 [Xbox, PC]
Marathon 2: Durandal
1995 [Mac, PC, Pippin]

High Point

It's hard to draw one clear highlight from Bungie's impressive resumé. Still, as much as the team did more than most for the formative years of Mac gaming with *Marathon*, we'd argue that it's the original *Halo* that stands up as most important as Bungie embraces a multi-format future.

■ Weapons aren't particularly original and it's clear that the game would benefit from a few more types. It could be that the super-rare Exotic guns remedy this (we've not been fortunate enough to try one out yet) or it's something that could come in an update.

we'd most likely start by not calling one of the enemies in our sci-fi FPS a wizard.

Destiny's moment-on-moment gameplay makes incredible use of that seemingly restrictive always-online requirement, to the point where it makes it seem absolutely essential to the experience – imagine how hard it would be to go back to offline *Dark Souls* after experiencing invasions and summonings and you're somewhere along the right track. Even within our first few hours of the game, we'd had enough friendly faces come to the rescue when things seemed grim to see the kinds of moments that this system could produce, cutscene-style last ditch saves that are entirely unscripted and could turn strangers into heroes or make accidental life-savers out of inquisitive friends who are a little too eager with the Join Fireteam option.

While From Software's bleak online vision of never being safe from harm made the games what they are, Bungie enjoys similar success with its message of hope – it only takes the thunderous crack of a distant sniper rifle and violent headsplosion of the enemy that caught you with your pants down to tell you that 'always online' isn't intrinsically a negative, and that it in fact has the potential to create stories that no other shooter right now can tell.

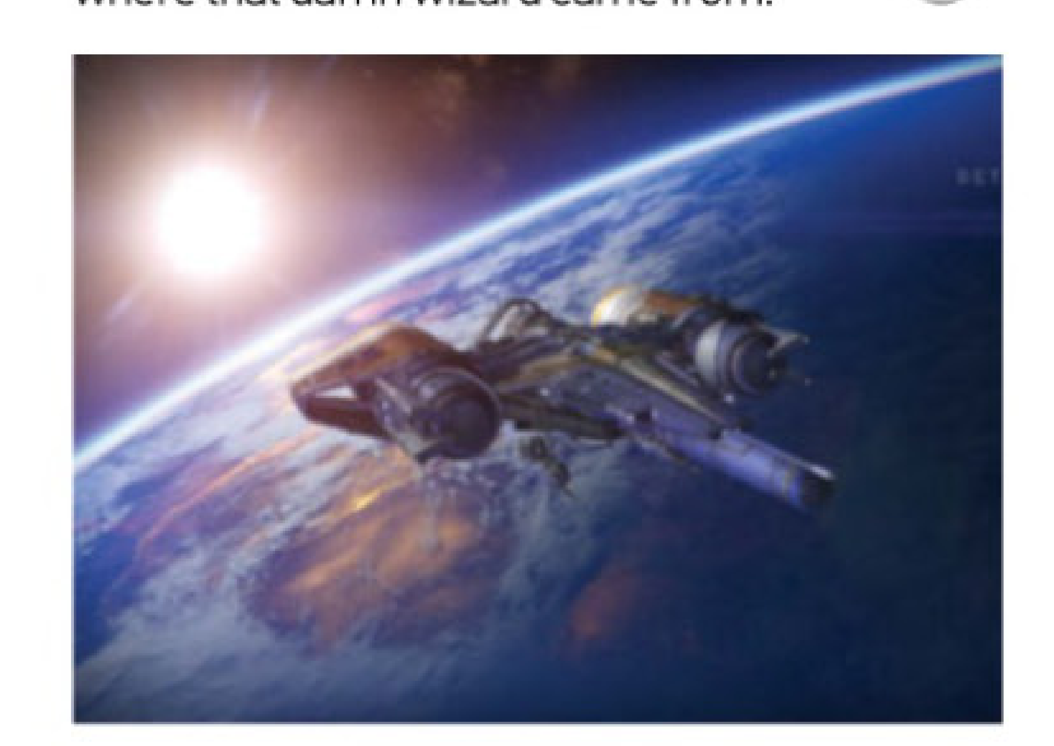
> "We went deep into fantasy and sci-fi, and pulled the two together. I think the team really nailed it"
>
> **HAROLD RYAN** PRESIDENT, BUNGIE

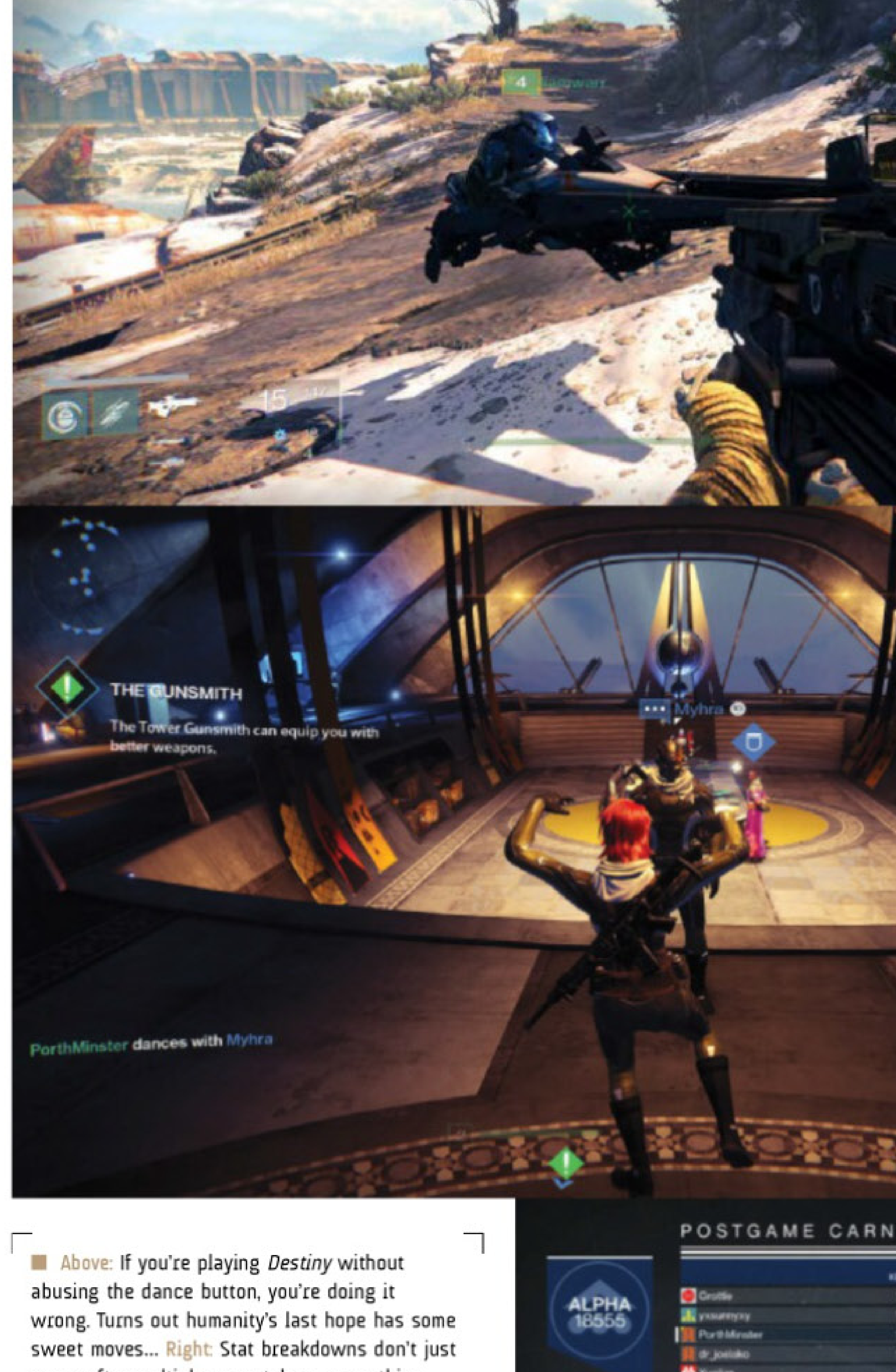
It's a little odd, then, that *Destiny*'s competitive side seems more interested in telling stories that have been told for so long that the original version might as well be carved into a cave wall somewhere. To be fair, it's equally odd that such traditional team-based multiplayer modes have here come to be known as 'PvP' – sure, the rest of the game has a rich MMO air about it but this is just the straight-up multiplayer FPS combat that Bungie does so well, no more 'PvP' than *COD* or even *Street Fighter*.

/// There's a chance that the full version will change this up a little, mind. So far we've only had access to one version of each of the three classes, with the additional sub-classes seemingly geared much more around playing team roles in competitive multiplayer. Blademaster Hunters have stealth options for ultimate secret sniping potential, for instance, while the missing Titan and Warlock variants offer team protection plus Super regeneration and team-wide buffs respectively, so it'll be interesting to see how those change things up. It recalls *DC Universe Online* – another MMO, who knew? – in that all classes can be played for damage or their own team-based role, especially true once you start fiddling with unlockable stat modifiers to turn roles on their heads and create your own custom Guardian unlike any other.

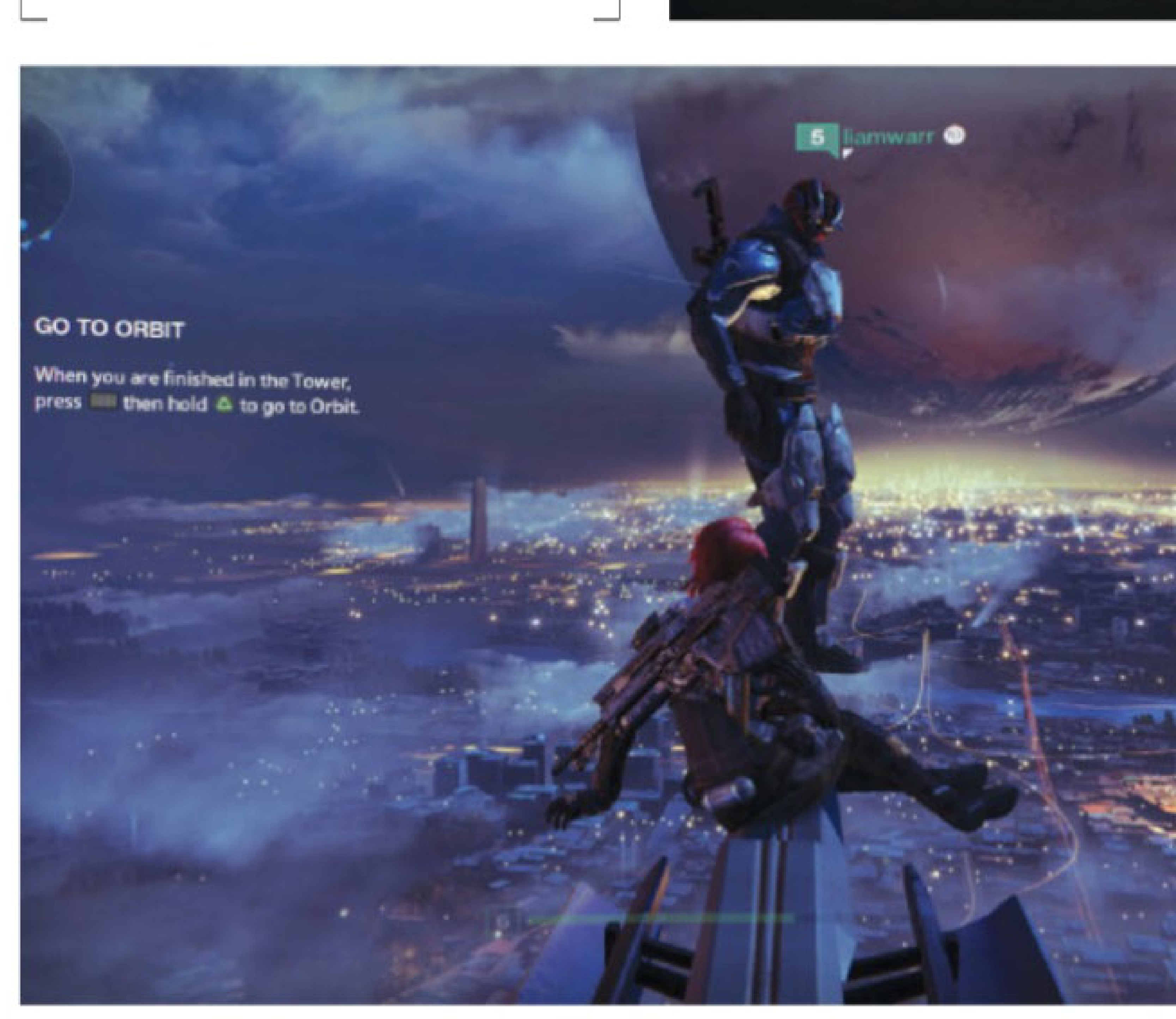
/// Regardless, this is clearly the aspect of the game most in need of balancing. Even though the core team-on-team experience does its best to normalise levels and weapon stats, additional character perks and such make it incredibly easy to feel like you're behind the curve rather than lacking in experience or skill – failure to address this could see huge chunks of the player base scared away from what can be an intense and rewarding online experience, so we imagine this next month in the run-up to launch will be quite the balancing act for Bungie.

It wasn't just the time-sensitive nature of *Destiny*'s beta test that had us and many others hooked, either – it was the fact that even with a limited pool of play options and a relatively low level cap, the flow of the game already rivalled and surpassed many of the regular FPS experiences we would stick on of an evening as a matter of course. There's more to *Destiny* than the likes of *Titanfall* and *COD* can boast, a degree of online stability that even a year on, *Battlefield 4* is still trying in vain to offer and a greater bank of options than even similar titles like *Borderlands* can dream of offering. MMOs are notorious for their ability to rob players of hours of their lives and in that respect, we have no trouble throwing *Destiny* in with company that its parents clearly don't want it to keep. It's as compelling and addictive as anything else out there right now and so long as Bungie can either set the level cap high enough (in-game content suggests a cap of 20, which seems a little low) or keep the end-game content as good as the journey to it, we'll have no trouble doing it all again from scratch next month. If nothing else, we're just dying to find out where that damn wizard came from.





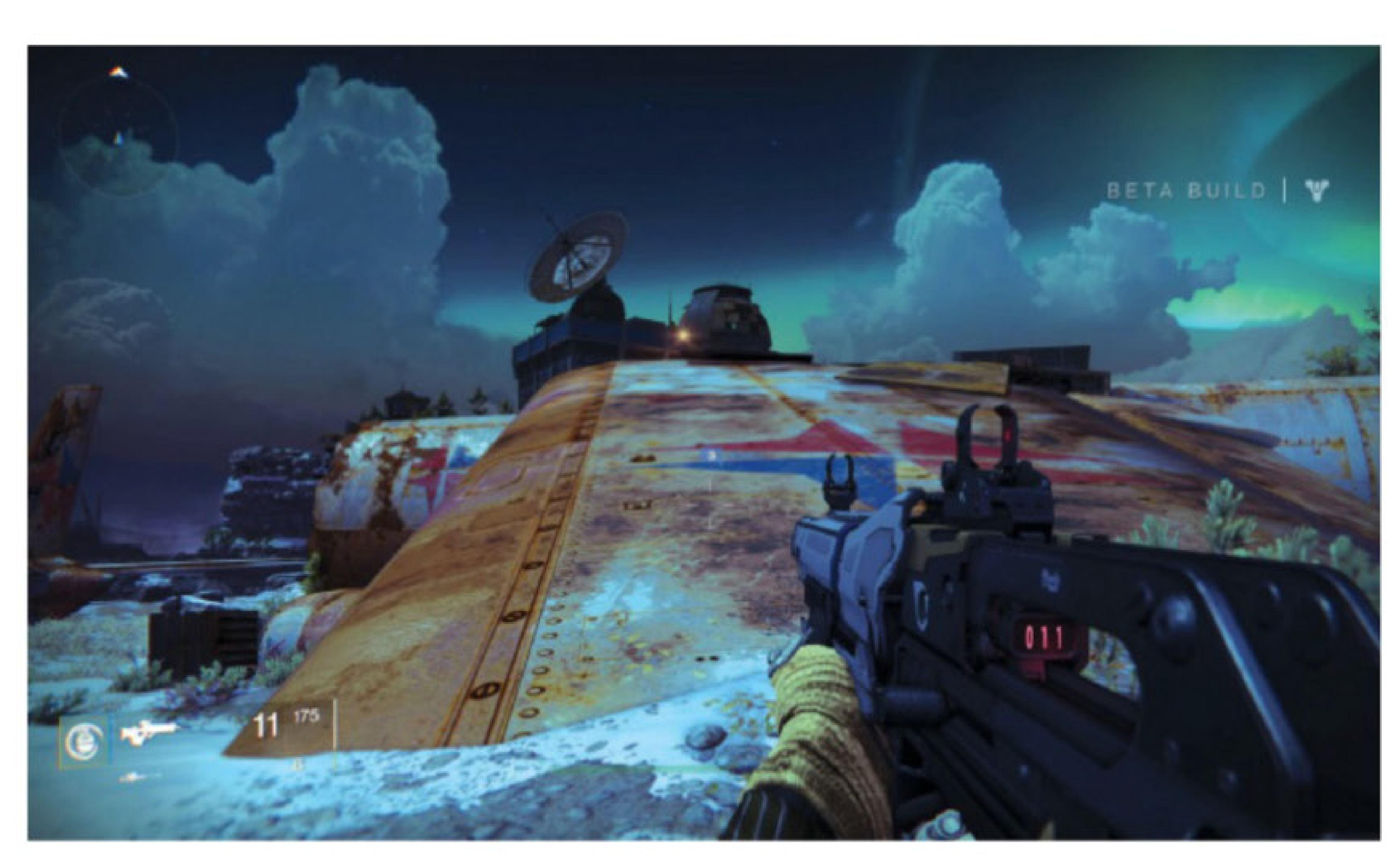
Above: If you're playing *Destiny* without abusing the dance button, you're doing it wrong. Turns out humanity's last hope has some sweet moves… Right: Stat breakdowns don't just occur after multiplayer matches – everything you do is tracked by the server and detailed stat lists can be called up via the game's nifty companion app. This also offers the full Grimoire (collectable cards, essentially), a Tower map and the ability to message friends and alter your loadout on the fly.

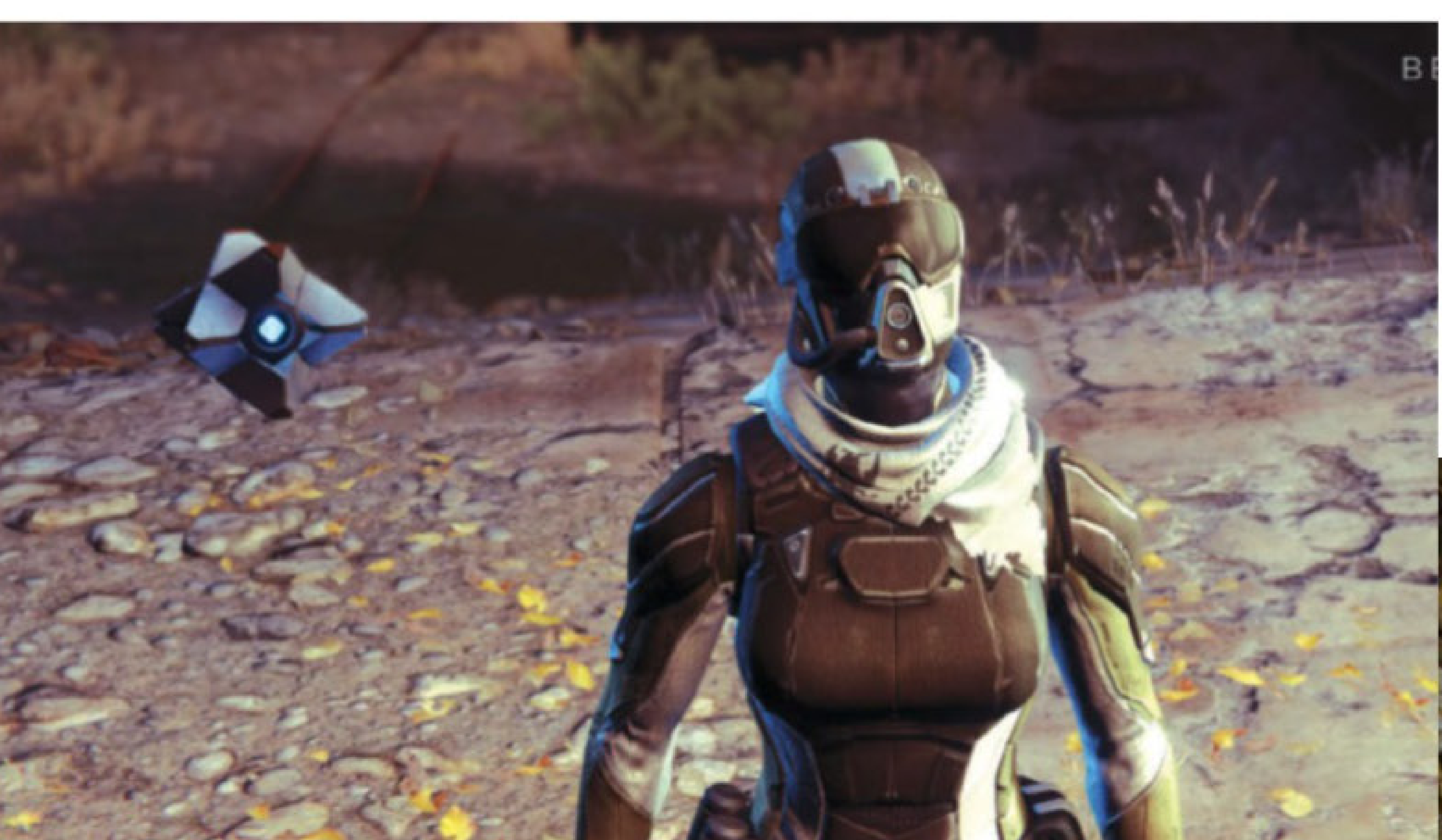


Above: The view from The Tower is absolutely incredible – we spent hours just perched here and looking out over what remains of humanity.

MODALLY AVERAGE

IN TERMS OF competitive multiplayer modes, only Control was made available during the beta – a fairly standard mode where teams battle for dominance of three main points on each map. The Crucible menu, however, spilled Bungie's every bean in its descriptions of the missing modes, with the main surprise being how few surprises there are. In addition to Control, there are the staples of Team Deathmatch and Free-For-All plus a pair of smaller variants – one which sounds like a Capture The Flag affair and another that seems like it may be a *Counter-Strike/Rainbow Six* style tactical squad showdown, with teams of three rather than six. As entertaining as Control was, a game this ambitious surely demands more?





■ Above: Environments are stunning, especially when visited at the right time of day to really catch their best side. We've seen it before in the likes of *Fallout* and *The Last Of Us* but still, the grim beauty of a tattered world still gets us every time
Left: Your Ghost can help out by interacting with various technology you'll find in the world, plus it can be summoned to offer a little light, digistruct a vehicle, or send you back into orbit.






EASY PC

GIVEN HOW READILY other developers have come out and said that the new consoles' parallels with PC architecture make it easy to develop for all platforms in tandem, we're amazed that there's still no PC release planned for *Destiny*. It absolutely beggars belief – between the strong FPS player base, the huge MMO communities and the hardware parity, even on a business level we'd expect to see a PC version of the game. It may still be coming down the line – don't forget that *Destiny* is a ten-year project for Activision – but even so, the lack of a PC SKU from day one is both surprising and disappointing.



Inset Not much is known about multiplayer yet. Such is the frenzy the internet gets itself into over each new *COD* entry, even dinosaurs are rumoured to be involved in this year's online component.

Inset There's some pretty outrageous technology that players will be able to utilise in *Advanced Warfare*'s campaign. However, Sledgehammer insists that the game will be founded in reality, with much of the futuristic weaponry based on real-life military hardware.

Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare

CONCEPT ■ The first *COD* to utilise a three-year development cycle in years, the future-set sequel is set to rejuvenate the *COD* brand with a twist on the military shooter

We take the opportunity to talk to the developer of the first fully next-gen COD

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Sledgehammer Games
Release: 4 November
Genre: First-person shooter
Players: 1-TBC

Franchise Profile

Fans of everything that goes boom have been well served by the *Call Of Duty* franchise for over a decade. Created by Infinity Ward, WWII shooter *Call Of Duty* first launched on PC in 2003 and has released annually ever since. It would dwell in its period setting for a few more years, before the fourth mainline entry redefined competitive multiplayer.

Developer History

Call Of Duty: Ghosts **2013 [Multi]**
Call Of Duty: Black Ops **2011 [Multi]**
Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare **2008 [Multi]**
Call Of Duty **2003 [PC]**

High Point

While later entries arguably refined the formula, the original *Modern Warfare* is hugely inventive and pioneering in its genre. It set the bar for the following generation of first-person shooters and heralded in a new age of multiplayer.

***Call Of Duty* undergoes a loose definition of the term 'revolution' on an annual basis these days, both in an attempt to silence its detractors and energise its sales past another vault-busting statistic to make its publisher Activision buckle under the weight of its brim-full coffers.** However, given the latest noise coming out of the newly minted developer to tackle the franchise, Sledgehammer Games, the latest entry in the ubiquitous franchise might just deliver on that unfulfilled promise. **games™** sits down with *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare*'s creative director Bret Robbins to talk all things boom and bang.

In terms of graphics overall, in the second year of the new consoles, how big a step is *Advanced Warfare* compared to *Ghosts*?

I think that's the big difference; *Advanced Warfare* is the first *Call Of Duty* game developed truly on next-gen. Sledgehammer Games has led the next-gen effort, so all of our assets and all of our rendering was built to try to maximize the new consoles, and that has created a really big leap in fidelity.

How much focus was put on facial tech? There appears to be a significant jump between *Ghosts* and *Advanced Warfare*.

It was huge for us, and it was a decision we made early in the project to make characters' faces much better to make them stand out. Narratively, we're introducing a lot of new characters and we want to make them memorable, so it was important for us to make the faces look great. We use performance capture, so when we do the motion capture for the story scenes, we're capturing not just the body movements, but also the face, the voice. It's a full performance.

We use what's called Blend Shapes in the face, which give a high level of fidelity to all the musculature. We use wrinkle maps to show forehead wrinkles and all of that stuff. It's all the

> "A lot of the technology in the game turns out to be real life, and half of it we didn't even know at the time"
> BRET ROBBINS, SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

latest technology honestly, we've adopted a lot of that technology, and the results have been really good for us.

We've seen a stealth section that looks like a throwback to the ghillie suit mission from *Call of Duty 4*. How much of the game was inspired by previous games, and how much of it was designed to be more of your own thing?

We take inspiration for a lot of sources, not just the franchise but from other videogames, movies, and television. We never look at another source and say 'Hey, we want to do it like that.' We have an idea that fits into the flow of the game and we start saying to ourselves 'Okay, we have this idea; how has it been done before? Where has it been done before? How can we do it better?' So we have a bunch of original ideas and work backwards from there. We have a lot of crazy scenes in the game, and we found out [a lot of] the technology is really being done today. The exoskeleton for one, we're seeing a lot of articles on exoskeletons for paraplegics or exoskeletons for soldiers so they can lift more weight. A lot of the technology in the game turns out to be real life, and half of it we didn't even know at the time.

How has the exoskeleton allowed you to break out from some of the common DNA of the other *Call Of Duty* games?

I really feel like it has. We're really able to give you some new movement off of the controller with the boost dodge, boost slide, boost jump, you can chain moves together which feels really good and different. With mechanics, I'm a game designer so I'm always looking for a new mechanic to throw into the game, and it gave us a lot of new options to really create these super soldiers and let us do more than we could do before. It's also a challenge, as we don't want to go too far. He isn't Iron Man, he isn't a superhero; he's still a soldier, so you always kind of have to walk that line.

Is the main character a silent protagonist? If so, how does that affect the script writing?

It's always a tough choice; I've worked on many games and this has always come up; should we have him talk, should we not have him talk, etc. I was the creative director on *Dead Space 1* and we chose not to have Isaac talk. The push and pull is always immersion versus story. It probably does drive the narrative a little more by having him speak, but it can wreck the immersion of the player who would say 'Hey that's not what I'd say, that doesn't sound like me.' We kind of split the difference: during the cinematics, Mitchell does speak so you can preserve the in-the-moment immersion. We kind of do both, but he is a real character with a real arc. I think he's a really cool character, and he's voiced by Troy Baker, who's been in everything, and he's awesome to work with.



Inset: Sledgehammer is developing *Advanced Warfare* exclusively for PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. The PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 iterations will be developed by High Moon Studios and there's no word yet whether the game will appear on Wii U at all.

Inset: Kevin Spacey channels the simmering menace of, well, pretty much every character he's ever portrayed on the silver screen.

Inset: Certainly the use of exoskeletons and other futuristic weapons has made *Advanced Warfare* a breath of fresh air in the franchise.

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

Casting Kevin Spacey in anything, let alone a *videogame*, is pretty much a big deal. We ask creative director Bret Robbins to explain how *Call Of Duty* managed to net one of Hollywood's most celebrated actors. "He's been phenomenal," enthuses Robbins, while demurring reports Spacey will be the main antagonist. "We actually wrote the part of Jonathan Irons with him in mind and we were fortunate enough to get him. He'd never done a videogame before – that alone made it pretty remarkable that he said yes. He really invested himself in the character and the script, had a ton of questions about the story, and we worked closely with him for a number of months. I was fortunate enough to work with him on set, and he was incredibly professional, incredibly talented, and it sort of elevated the work of everyone around him."

Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor

CONCEPT ■ An action-adventure RPG that asks players to infiltrate the evil Orc hierarchy across JRR Tolkien's world of Middle-earth

Lord Of The Rings goes dark in Warner Bros' next Arkham

While many game designers have been seduced by the allure of JRR Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings* over the past three decades, only a few can claim to have successfully wielded its power. Given the rich density of the enduring mythology, not to mention how Peter Jackson and his team of visual effects wizards have vividly conceptualised the series in recent years, how many games set in the realm of dwarfs, orcs and Hobbits have been actually *good*, let alone *great*? It's a shockingly low amount.

It's a good start that Monolith Productions has already got its hairy feet comfortably planted in Middle-earth with *Guardians Of Middle-earth* – a top-down MOBA with surprisingly capable mechanics – but *Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor* offers a much larger canvas for the developer to explore Tolkien's lore. The studio is well aware of the opportunity and responsibility it has been presented, revealing, in addition to a slew of new gameplay features, exactly how *Shadow Of Mordor*'s story will interact with the central narrative fans of both the book and cinematic saga will be familiar with in innovative and (perhaps most important to its legion of enthusiasts) mostly non-retconning ways.

Set between the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings*, we already know that the story finds Talion – a ranger of Gondor – resurrected after he and his family were brutally murdered by Sauron's armies. What has been made clearer is the underlining mystery to his resurrection that sets him on a path of vengeance through the gates of Mordor and who will be alongside him on the journey through the darkest corner of Middle-earth.

Sometime after his death, Talion's body is joined with that of wraith Celebrimbor, the Noldorin prince that forged the Rings Of Power in Middle-earth history. Unlike Talion, he's a Tolkien creation, simmering on his own personal quarrel with Sauron after being tortured at the Dark Lord's hands and witnessing the slaughter of his people. To make this possible in narrative terms, it means that Monolith has done some re-jigging of the timeline to make events fit better into place (the escape of the Witch-king being the main event altered from the books so it fits in line with the cinematic universe).

/// Nevertheless, Warner Bros. is keen to promote the character's inclusion as a complex and nuanced addition that makes the conflict with Sauron richer, but the revelation of the other player-character identity does much more to enrich *Shadow Of Mordor* on a gameplay level.

> "Shadow Of Mordor is a new chapter in the world that JRR Tolkien created"
> CHRISTIAN CANTAMESSA, MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS

Tolkien has always been restrained when presenting the level of power that some of his characters are capable of wielding – the good guys tend to have rigid rules that prevent, say, Gandalf doing more than just illuminating the lightbulb at the end of his staff. That's not the case with the shadier cast of characters in *Shadow Of Mordor*. Celebrimbor has access to an array of supernatural abilities that Tolkien's lore acknowledges but rarely showcases – which, as it happens, makes it perfect for videogame adaptation.

Exploring the dark side of Tolkien, Monolith enables players to utilise a suite of powers with deadly consequences. Your supernatural abilities enables the player to teleport around the environment to get the spring on enemies to perform gruesome takedowns, while using a bow Celebrimbor can also bind enemies' feet to the ground with special arrow-types and slow down time at will to take control of a chaotic battle.

It's here that, despite its open world and gothic aesthetic, that *Shadow Of Mordor*

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer: Monolith Productions
Release: 30 Septermber
Genre: Action-Adventure
Players: 1

Lord Of The Rings Profile

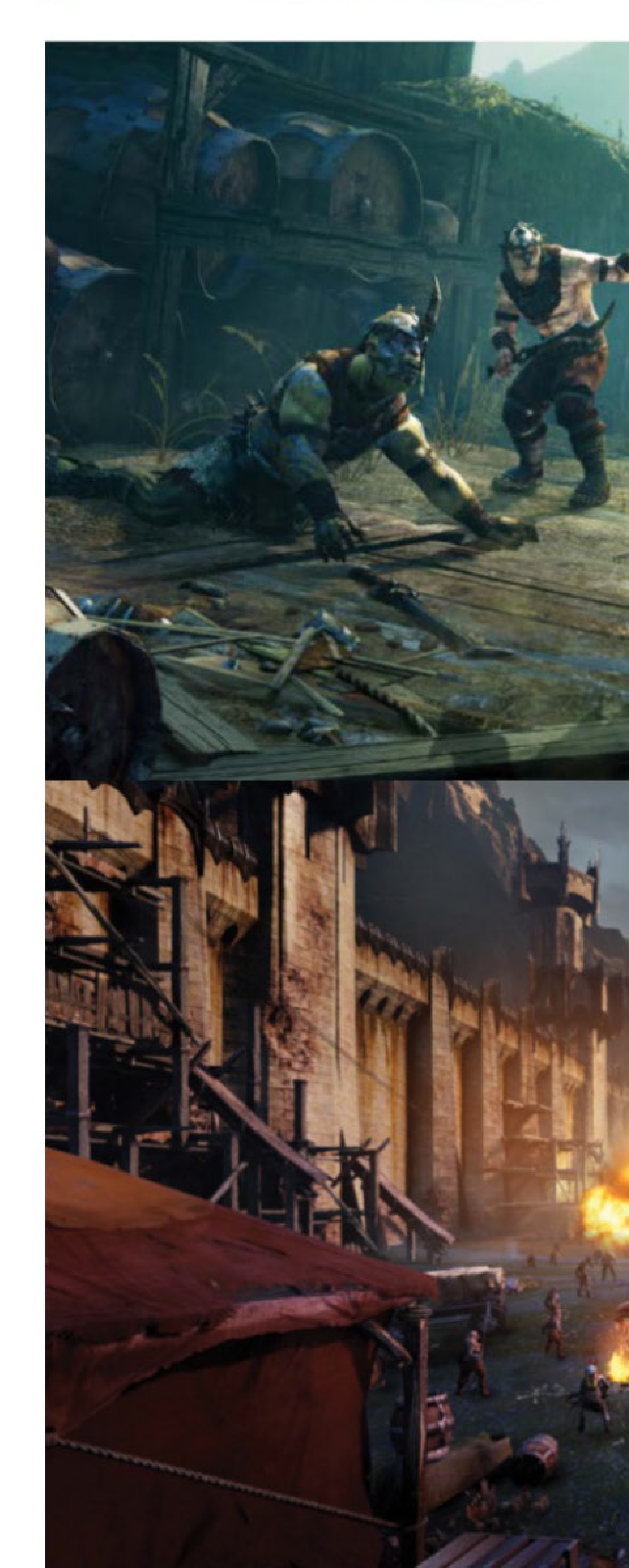
That little gold ring has been the inspiration for multiple videogame adaptations over the years, from *The Hobbit* text adventure in 1982 up to *Lego The Hobbit* earlier this year. RPGs, third-person action games, MOBAs – you name it, someone has attempted it. One game to rule them all? Try around 33…

Developer History

Lego The Lord Of The Rings **2012 [Multi]**
The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King **2003 [Multi]**
The Lord Of The Rings Volume 1 **1994 [SNES]**
The Hobbit **1982 [Multi]**

High Point

While developers have admirably wrestled with the source material for over 30 years, EA did the best to capture the epic scale of both the books and movie adaptations in the RTS *The Battle For Middle-earth*.



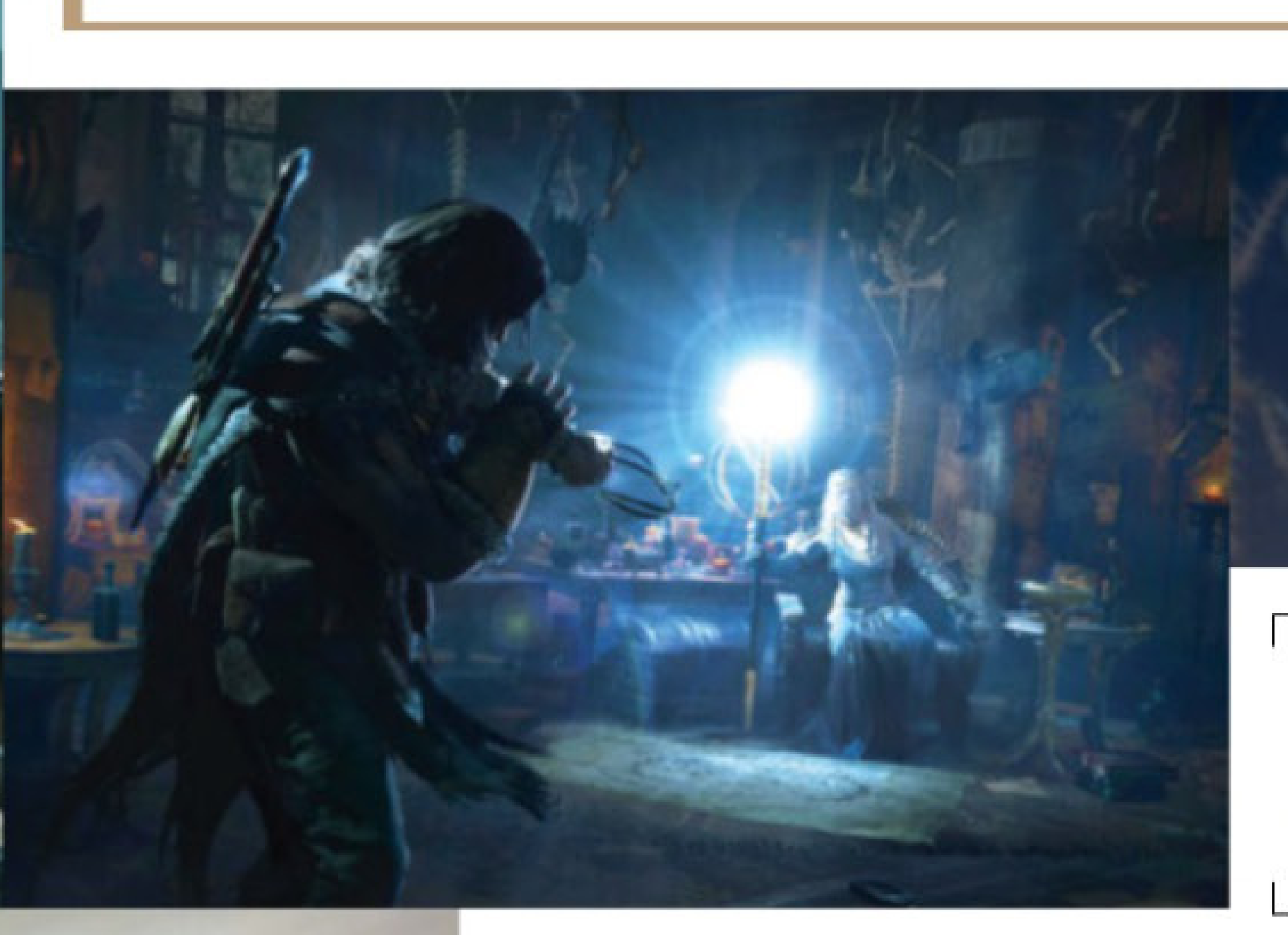


Below: There are a wide selection of Wraith powers that become available through the game, keeping the action constantly evolving.



THE PRECIOUSSSS

WHILE TALION HIMSELF is an original creation surrounded by either minor characters or individuals found buried in *Return Of The King*'s lengthy appendixes, there will be a few familiar faces to placate fans. One major character that has a significant role to play is Gollum, who players will have to specifically find hiding in Mordor somewhere to progress the plot. Gollum's history of the ring informs Talion of the mystical powers he wields, while he's also able to shed light on Celebrimbor's past – triggering his memory to work out why his Wraith-spirit has united with Talion's mortal body. While Monolith has yet to reveal anyone else, expect a few more cameos through the game's campaign.



Above: Talion is voiced by the ubiquitous talent that is Troy Baker. So prevalent is his acting work that he's fast becoming the most renowned voice actor in the industry. Left: There are plenty of other characters featured that fans of the books will be familiar with.





begins to differentiate itself from *Assassin's Creed* (the game that Monolith's title has unfortunately found itself compared to constantly since its announcement) and begins to look a lot more like Rocksteady's *Arkham* franchise. Navigating high above the environment, Talion can pick off enemies silently, one by one, and from a distance. Also, the Orcs that populate the world reside in many of the outposts dotted around the map. These tightly-constructed miniature sandboxes offer verticality and vantage points for stealth play, while close-quarter combat is equally skilled. In fact, the latter seems directly lifted from *Arkham*, with its simplistic combos and counter-attacks that make for both fast-paced and satisfying skirmishes.

However, more interesting is the domination mechanic that has been the much-vaunted USP of Monolith's title. It's here that the game reveals a much deeper strategy element within its Nemesis system, dominating Orc captains to betray their leaders, allowing them to enter into the Orc hierarchy and potentially give the player control over faction warlords. As Talion kills his way through Sauron's high-ranking lieutenants, entire armies can be controlled and used to cause destruction and chaos across various districts of Mordor.

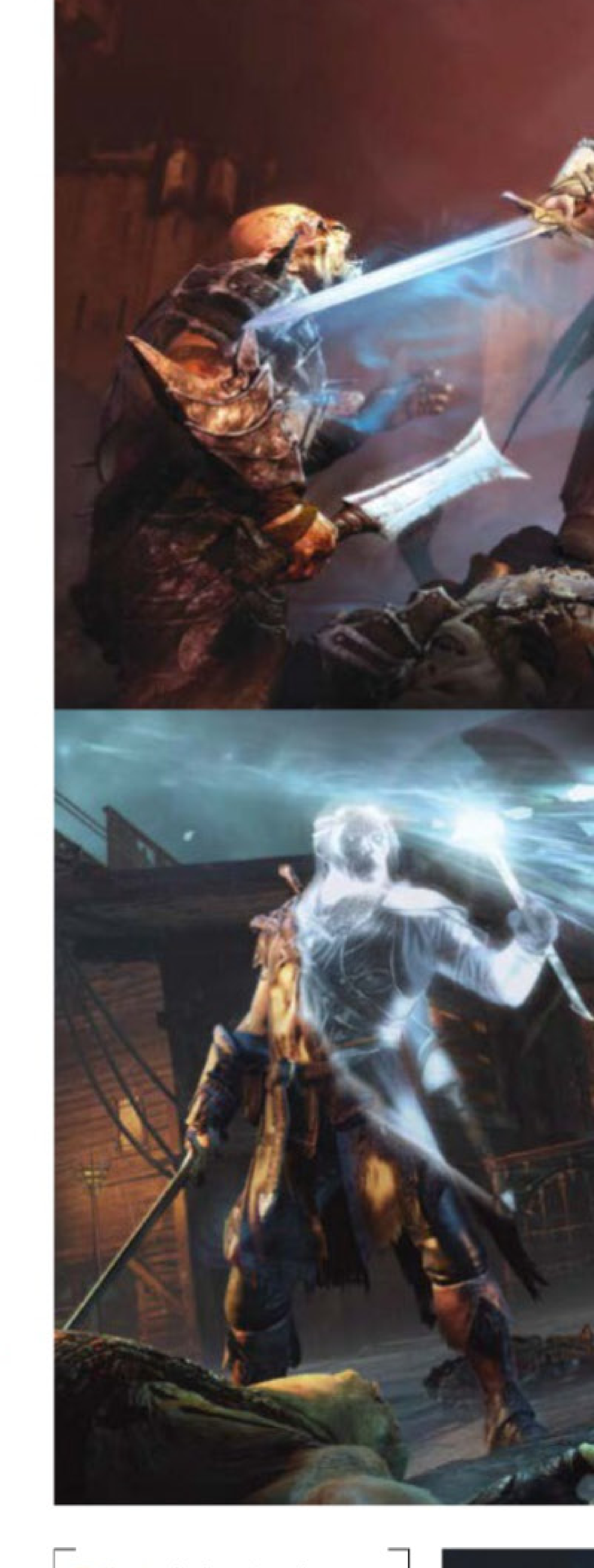
What's more, dominating Orcs and sending them to do your bidding doesn't create a scripted conclusion. Instead, this can drastically change the dynamics of your next major target as paying close attention to the politics and rivalry within the Orc military will gain the player an advantage in a society where reputation is everything. Look ahead to major events within the Orc battalions and you'll find opportunities for sabotage utilising dominated enemies as traps for new targets to fall unwittingly into. Even more impressive is that events can occur without Talion being in close proximity with his legion of mind-controlled minions – massive plot-shifting events may well take place off-screen after being triggered by earlier actions.

/// Add to that NPCs with their own personality traits and fears, and the results is a subversive twist on the open-world action game where it's entirely possible for major characters to be killed with barely any player interaction. That doesn't sound like a particularly positive note but in action it presents a huge amount of personality. An Orc warlord you may have fought and escaped will remember you on your next encounter and will directly refer to your previous entanglement. Elsewhere,

RUNE WITH A VIEW

THERE'S A LEVELLING system present in *Shadow Of Mordor* but it won't include any passive buffs. Instead, Monolith wanted all points to be put into active abilities. However, given that weapons are such an important part of Middle-earth lore, Talion's own arsenal of pointy things are treated as characters. When you kill Orc captains through the game, they'll drop runes (particularly if you exploit an enemy's weakness) that can apply buffs to your weapons. Epic runes offer more powerful enhancements and can be gained through dominating a captain and having them deliver a warning to their warchief. Take them down and you'll gain a mighty reward that not only unlocks powerful abilities but boosts your reputation throughout Mordor.

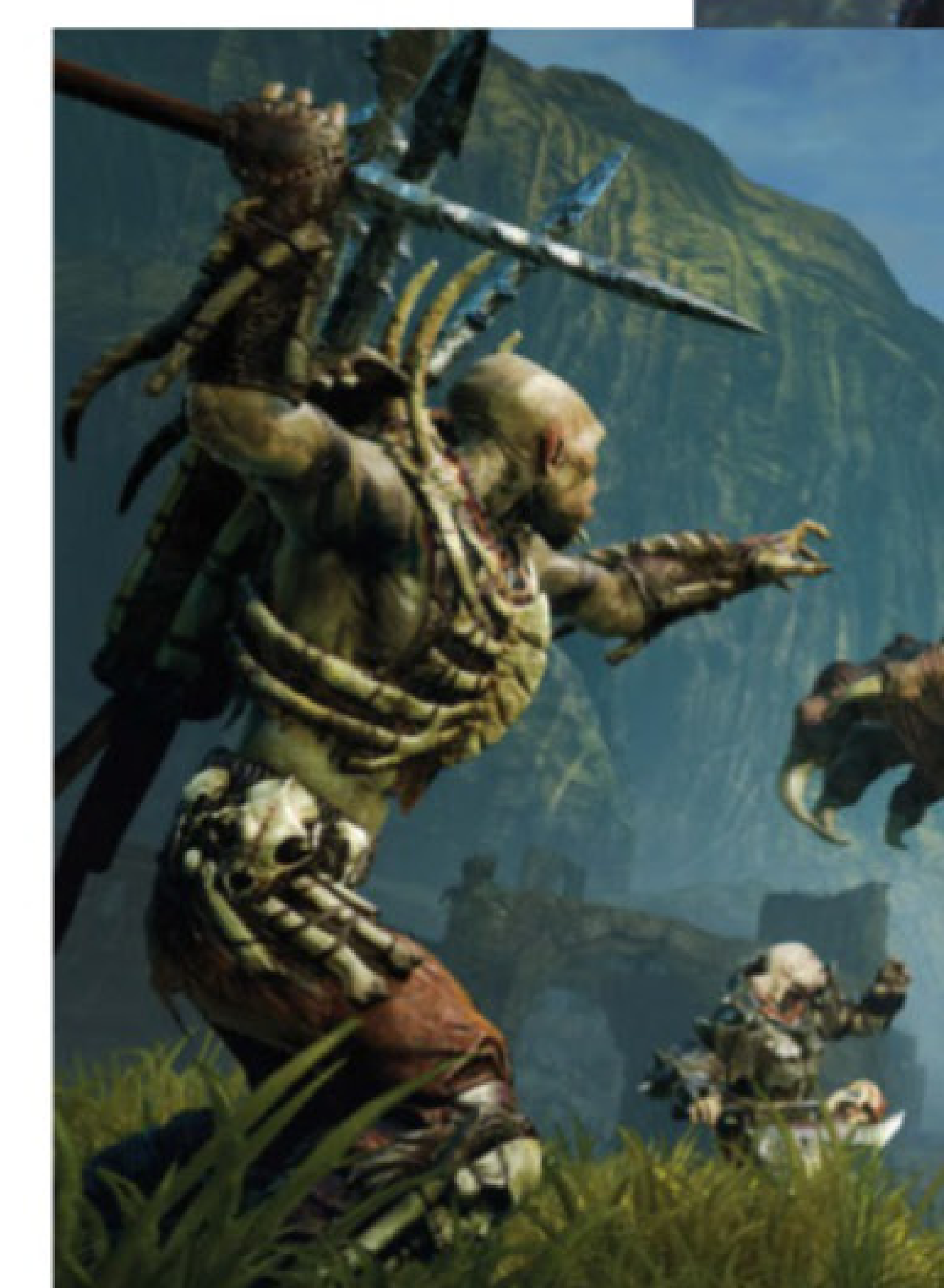
"For Shadow Of Mordor it was the challenge of creating something new. It's respectful of [Tolkien's] ideas while incorporating ours"
CHRISTIAN CANTAMESSA, MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS

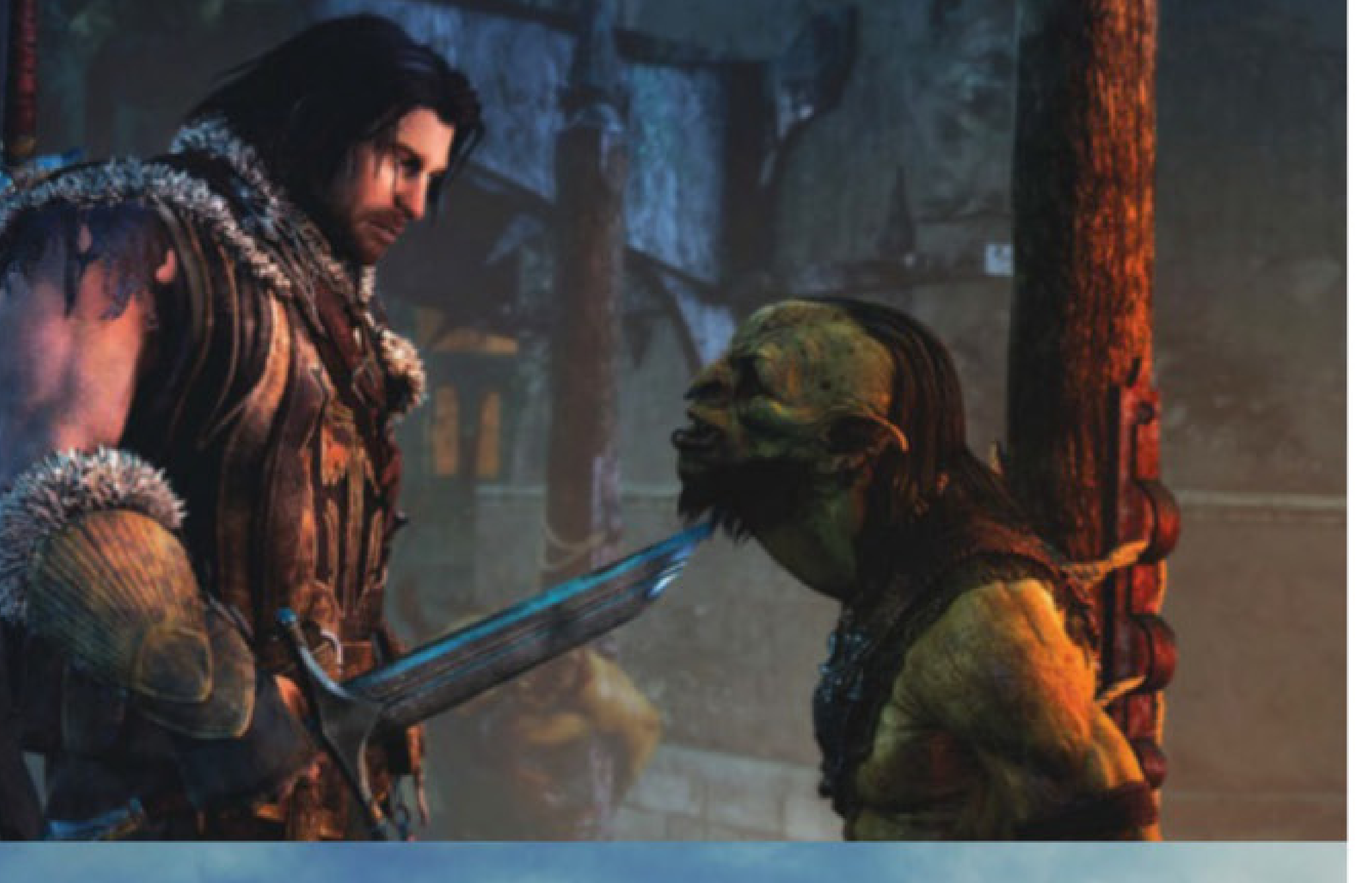


Above: *Shadow Of Mordor* finds a particularly vague point in Tolkien's timeline and explores some of the characters that merely get mentioned. Fans will no doubt spot a few contradictions, though. Right: It's not all chopping and murderin' in *Shadow Of Mordor*. Throughout Talion's quest, you'll have various targets that need to be interrogated for further information on the location of the primary antagonists spread across Mordor. Below: Along with the smaller animals that can be controlled, there are also larger creatures capable of causing a massive amount of destruction.



Above: The game stretches itself beyond just simple parkour and wall-climbing for navigation across its in-game world; you're able to dominate Mordor's local wildlife and use them as a mound to gallop across Sauron's domain.







the procedurally-generated Orc types create characters with unique dialogue and characteristics. Story does take precedence but it's one completely of your own invention and plausibly different from player-to-player that splits off in dynamic and involving directions.

It also makes the act of failure meaningful. Where *Dark Souls* needs players to learn from their mistakes each time they fall because the situation will be the same, *Shadow Of Mordor* evolves its AI with every subsequent death.

A lowly Orc grunt who manages to deal a deathly blow to Talion will gain points and level up, working their way up the chain of command – they may even start taking out your targets as they fulfil their own agenda. This raises the stakes by creating consequences that stretch beyond the protagonist, making its rogues gallery of snarling goblin types more than just a parade of placeholder challenges.

Unsurprisingly, that makes a short gameplay preview not ideal for conveying the different layers that the game has to offer. On the surface, it coalesces many of the fundamental features that have steered big franchises to success in recent years, from the parkour of *Assassin's Creed*, the combat of *Arkham* through to the abilities that call to mind *Dishonored*. In that regard, *Shadow Of Mordor* is mechanically sound, while its visuals seem to be making the most out of the latest console hardware, if not exactly pushing it to the limits. However, it's the potential for the complete unexpected that makes the whole game a tantalising experience.

/// It's here that the game offers respite from the oppressively gloomy central story and the ominous surroundings of Mordor as *anything* can seemingly happen at a moment's notice. For instance, jumping on a troll-like Graug (part of Mordor's local wildlife) and stomping on enemies creates an amusing scenario where other Orcs bolt to safety in fear of being trampled on by Talion's makeshift mount – again, some of which are likely to remember you if you encounter them again. There's something to be said about a game that has been frequently compared to other titles of its ilk that it can genuinely surprise and create engaging moments that feel unique.

While Monolith Productions has adapted Tolkien's work into a gritty, visceral action game (one that Warner Bros. no doubt hopes will create a new franchise once Rocksteady's Batman hangs up his cape in the coming months) it's more than just its story and setting that makes *Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor* a mature prospect. It's the intricate balance of complex systems put in place that makes it more than the sum of its parts, creating an action-adventure-cum-role-playing game with something new to offer. If it manages to deliver on its ambition and create an experience that does its source material justice, then prepare yourself for the *Lord Of The Rings* game to rule them all.

Below: Standard enemies have special abilities. One character can turn invisible and sneak up on unsuspecting heroes. Right: Each of the hero characters has a particular skillset that can be utilised in battle. These include a tank, a ranged character, a swordmaster and a magic type. Utilising each of these effectively as a team will (in theory) lead you to victory.



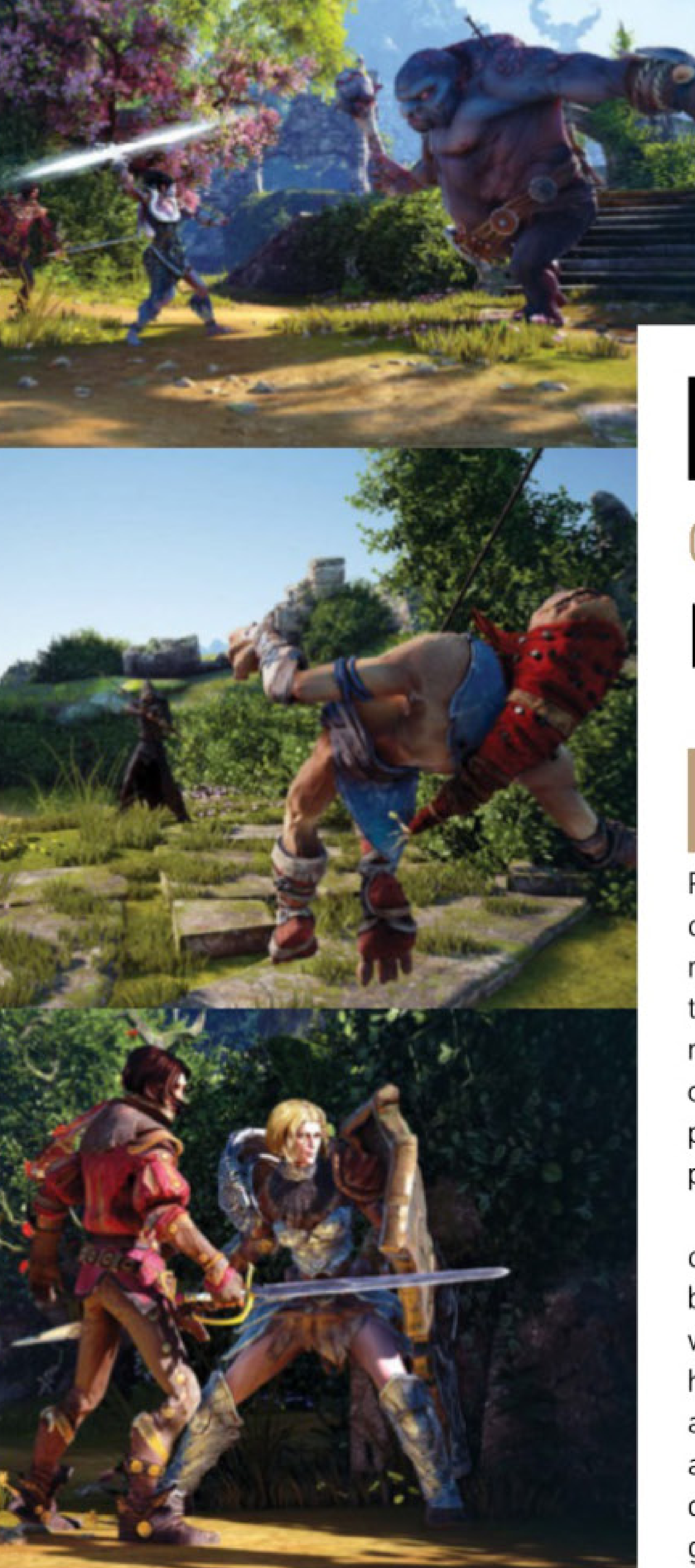
BACK TO ITS ROOTS

WHILE THERE HAVE been some drastic changes made to the *Fable* formula in *Legends*, that's not to say that Lionhead is completely turning its back on the series' past. Various elements from the trilogy to date reappear here, including the emote wheel in the local town. In fact, Lionhead is keen to emphasise that interactions will still be an important part of the game – where you can fool around, seduce and generally cause mischief among the townsfolk. And while *Legends* is a multiplayer take on the series, role-playing elements such as customisation, armour and loot will be essential, while a main quest will be accompanied by meaningful side-stories. If this isn't *Fable* 4, it'll certainly do until it arrives.





Above: There will be a range of customisable options available to the player. No doubt chickens will be involved somewhere along the lines.





Fable: Legends

CONCEPT ■ A multiplayer spin-off of *Fable* that toe-punts companion dogs and replaces them with hero party members, transforming the series into a third-person action game.

Retelling the tale

***Fable* has been a series characterised by promises made and promises broken.** That might conjure up thoughts of Peter Molyneux, for a long time the franchise's outspoken mouthpiece firing high-minded rhetoric without grounding, but you don't have to look far in the games themselves to see how much weight a promise holds – the closing chapter of *Fable III* eloquently illustrates this point: splitting the kingdom as both its ruthless protector and benevolent saint.

But even when you're closing down an orphanage to generate funds to raise an army, breaking promises left, right and centre, you were never quite as evil as the game would have you believe. Albion has traditionally been about creating heroes. "We've never let you be as evil as you could be," admits Lewis Brundish, designer on *Fable Legends*. "In the previous games you are a hero that is going to save the world one way or another – it may be at the expense of a few people but it's going to be saved. *Fable Legends* enables us to creatively take things to a degree we couldn't before."

/// The result is a more straightforward alignment of characters in *Fable Legends* – Lionhead's multiplayer excursion of Microsoft's exclusive franchise: you're either one of the four members of *Legends*' band of merry men looking to rid the surrounding forest of evil, or the big bad guy trying to invade the noble land. There's no blurring of lines here: you're either good or evil. "In previous *Fable* games we've had the notion of good and evil," says Brundish, "but your hero goes on one journey. Your hero is going to hit the same story beats and the same narrative, they're just going to see it through a good or evil lens. This time there's a proper clear divide between the two sides and the villain gets a story as well. It's just that that's a story that's running in parallel with the heroes and viewed from the other side."

As these quests begin, the heroes will be given an introduction about the local area being invaded by horrible creatures and offered a glorious mission to banish them from the land. Meanwhile, the villain is getting their own narrative about how their den is being invaded by these pesky heroes and issued an incentive to stomp them out." This offers two distinct perspectives on the action as well. While the heroes have a traditional third-person action game to run through, slaughtering beasties and trolls in waves, the alternative 'evil' side is given a top-down perspective of the action. Here, they are able to position enemies around the map and strategise with timed attacks and special character-types.

"This looks like an RTS but it's a bit more like *Dungeon Keeper* and has elements of other games," states Brundish. "In an RTS game you would have your units and the enemy would have their units and when those meet there'd be an exchange of statistics. In our game that's not the case because the people that you're fighting is a third-person action character. You can't guarantee how much damage any of these units are going to do – maybe your strong unit wont get any hits in; maybe your weak unit is going to kill someone. Rather than just being a game about statistics it's more about tactics and mind games; you want to be trying to outsmart them, flank them and trap them – that's how you're going to maximise the damage."

> "We've never let you be as evil as you could be"
> LEWIS BRUNDISH, LIONHEAD STUDIOS

For the enemy, that involves controlling different units mapped like hotkeys straight to the pad. However, for the heroes it involved a complete overhaul of the franchise's combat system. "We wanted to take it class-based and doing that really lets us expand on our combat types," says Brundish, expanding on the *Gears Of War*-style action.

"In previous *Fable*s melee had one button and ranged had one button and magic had one button. Now each of those types of styles – because we've devoted a whole hero to each one – takes over the entire controller. Combat can become much deeper and nuanced and everything else."

From what we've played, there's certainly one promise *Fable Legends* makes that it can keep: it'll be unlike any *Fable* adventure you've played before.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Lionhead Studios
Release: TBC 2015
Genre: Action-Adventure
Players: 1-5

Developer Profile

Co-founded by Peter Molyneux, Lionhead Studios has been closely associated with Microsoft since it opened its doors in 1996 and was acquired by the publisher in 2006. With three franchises to its name the studio continues the work of Molyneux after he exited the company, continuing to create first-party *Fable* titles for Xbox consoles.

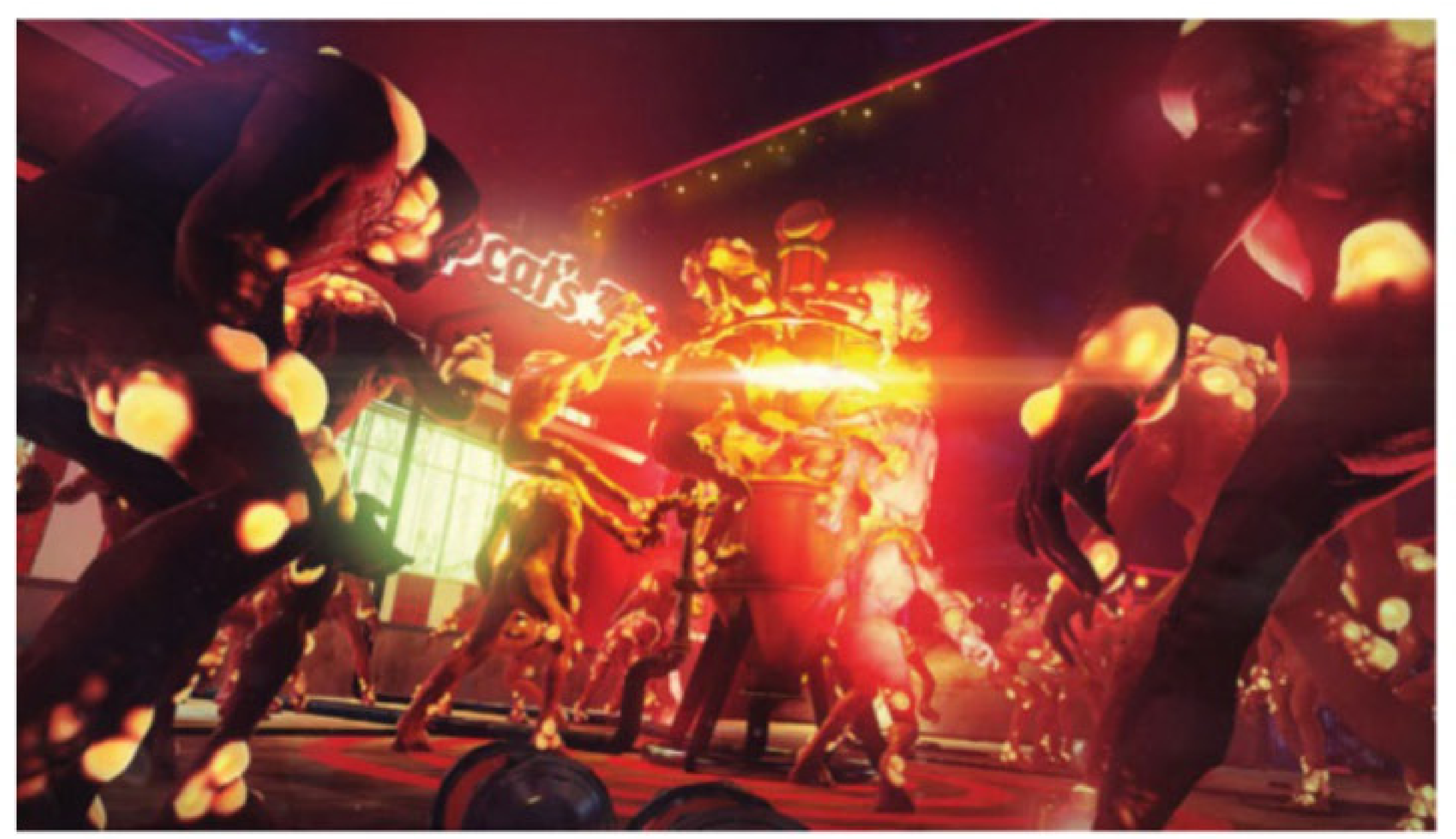
Developer History

Fable III
2010 [PC, Xbox 360]
The Movies
2005 [PC]
Fable
2004 [Xbox]
Black & White
2001 [PC]

High Point

The studio has been busy with *Fable* over recent years but its debut *Black & White* remains an innovative, unique and compelling god game.

■ Below: *Sunset Overdrive*'s biggest asset is its colourful and playful tone. It's a mess of self-referential in-jokes and allusions, but then that's a part of its charm.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Developer: Insomniac Games
Release: 31 September (US: 28 September)
Genre: Open-world shooter
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Insomniac Games has traditionally released games exclusively for PlayStation over the past two decades. From reinventing console platform games with *Spyro The Dragon* and *Ratchet & Clank*, to creating the leading FPS game on PlayStation 3 with the *Resistance* series.

Developer History

FUSE
PS3, Xbox 360 [2013]
Resistance 3
PS3 [2011]
Ratchet & Clank
PS2 [2002]
Spyro The Dragon
PlayStation [1998]

High Point

Spyro might be known for his ability to kickstart entire toy franchises these days thanks to *Skylanders*, but once upon a time that little dragon led some of the finest platforming to ever grace modern consoles.

Sunset Overdrive

CONCEPT ■ An open-world third-person shooter that's bringing together the chaos of *Crackdown 2*, *Ratchet & Clank*, *Jet Set Radio* and *Prince Of Persia* and blurring it into one crazy adventure.

Shall we go party? First, you got to take a selfie

The selfie is one of the loneliest forms of self-expression. Sure, it's a snapshot that'll do a fairly decent job of capturing you at your best, but it amplifies the idea that you're so alone there's nobody else to take the photo for you, let alone share the moment with. Sad times. That's real life for you, though; should you be unhappy with this state of affairs, we recommend you get yourself over to Sunset City. The only place in the world where a selfie isn't the catalyst for an Instagrammed-fuelled social media assault of personal unhappiness, but the first step to getting the ultimate party started.

Insomniac Games has revealed the multiplayer component to *Sunset Overdrive* and it's where the true potential of this Xbox One exclusive is springing to life. So, you're in single-player, you've just bashed in a few mutant heads, leapt off of a grind rail and strutted up to the nearest photo booth. One selfie later, and your custom character is whisked off into an eight-player frenzy dubbed Chaos Squad.

At its core, Chaos Squad is a wave-based mode that has you and seven friends battling against increasingly difficult enemies and objectives. But the experience is tailored to you and your group of misfit heroes. The missions are set in the open world, and between rounds you'll be given the option to choose between two objectives you might want to tackle. It can be anything from killing groups of enemies with increasingly insane weapons and amps; setting traps and defending important locations; or grinding around the city trying to plug the flow of Overcharge Delirium XT that's pouring into Sunset City.

Every win leads to another area of the city to use as your playground of colourful mass-mutant destruction. Such variation goes a long way to making each experience in Chaos Squad feel unique, especially as you never know what weapons one of the seven people in your party might bring to a game. Eventually, the rounds will lead to the main event: Night Defence.

> "It breaks the mould of traditional shooter games by delivering an open world that can change every day"
> TED PRICE, CEO, INSOMNIAC GAMES

This is where you're charged with defending vats of Overcharge against increasingly difficult, not to mention varied, waves of enemies. The amount of chaos you generated throughout the rounds will increase the difficulty in Night Defence, so you'll need to use everything at your disposal to make it out alive. Plus, if you *do* make it out alive, you'll find a host of new items waiting to be brought back into your single-player game. When it gets going, it's a hellstorm of explosions and movement, and it's undeniably fun.

Sunset Overdrive might never quite deliver on the creatively expansive single-player cooperative offering its debut trailer first hinted at last year, but Insomniac's latest is firing on all cylinders. We just hope its quirky tone and undeniable style don't end up growing tiresome before we're done with it.



■ Above: As you'd expect with any game from Insomniac, the weapons are pretty crazy. From a gun that exclusively fires ricocheting vinyls to a teddy bear strapped with dynamite, it's always fun to wield the weapons in *Sunset*.

Super Smash Bros.

CONCEPT ■ Videogame mascots far and wide unite in the fourth instalment of Nintendo's own royal rumble

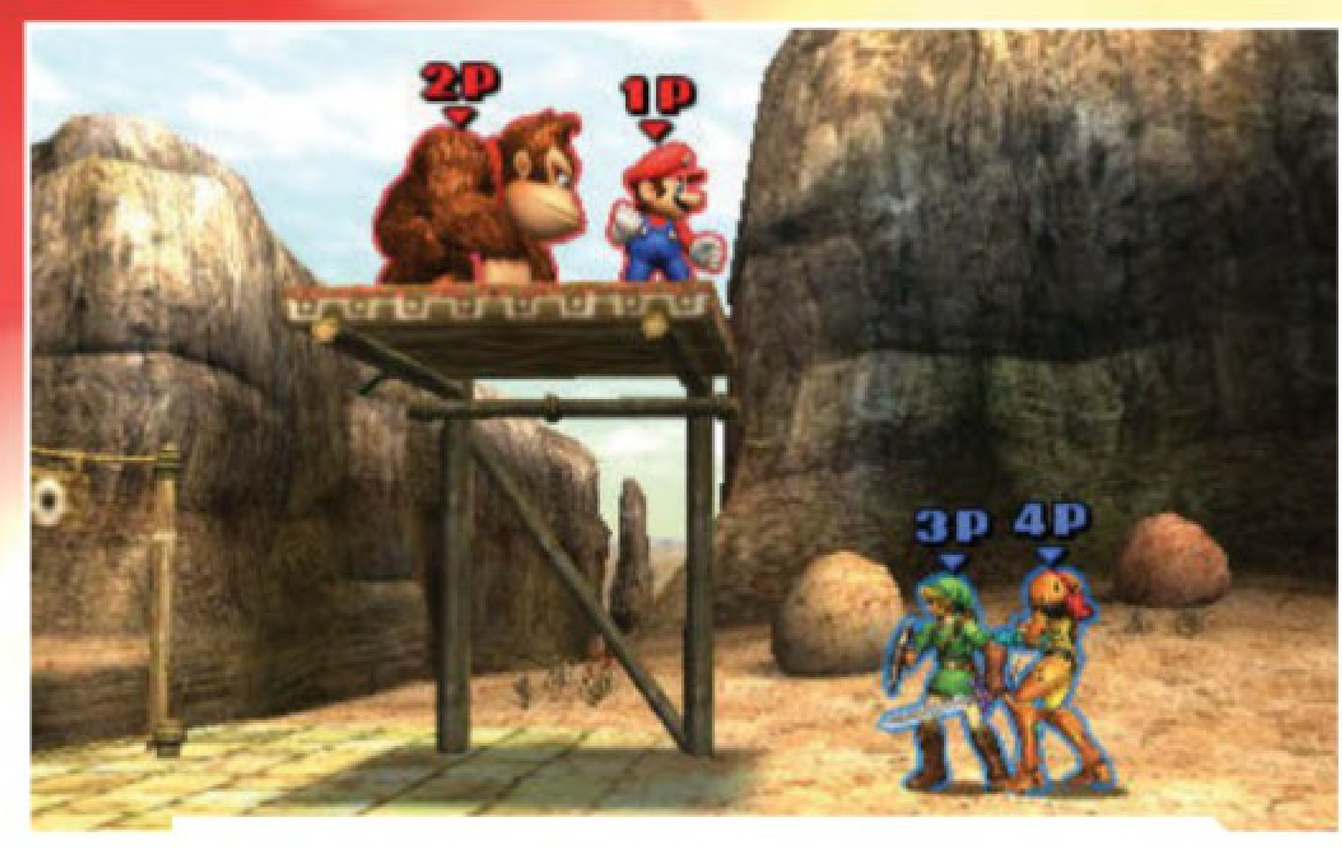
The gloves are off

Masahiro Sakurai shows no sign of ennui. For a man who has surrounded himself for over twenty years with Nintendo mascots (mostly fostering pink puffball Kirby through multiple titles), his enthusiasm for the franchises he has created has failed to wane over the years.

Having had multiple opportunities to get hands-on with both the Wii U and 3DS iteration of *Super Smash Bros.* over the past few months, **gamesTM** discovers an abiding sense of passion to the sequel. There's the expected tweaks to balancing and necessary expansions to create a more comprehensive fighting game for Nintendo's latest platforms, but even beneath these fundamental enhancements Sakurai appears to be simply having fun once again.

The fact that it boasts the series' most impressive character roster to date has no doubt galvanised Sakurai's efforts. While we're lamenting the loss of Solid Snake (although, there's always an outside chance Kojima's iconic creation might return), the inclusion of Mega Man, Pac-Man and Little Mac alongside returning combatants has not only made for a more diverse roll call but paved the way for a more inventive design sensibility. From bosses that invade stages mid-fight, to the Amiibo models that offer customisable characters to be used in-game, if it doesn't turn out to be the best *Smash Bros.* game ever then it'll at least be the most ambitious.

And, obviously, that's not a bad thing. Considering the series started out as Mario and Link simply punching each other into absurdity, the fact that it has matured into one of Nintendo's hottest properties can be attributed to the unyielding passion of its dedicated overseer. As long as Sakurai keeps fighting the good fight, gamers will be well served.



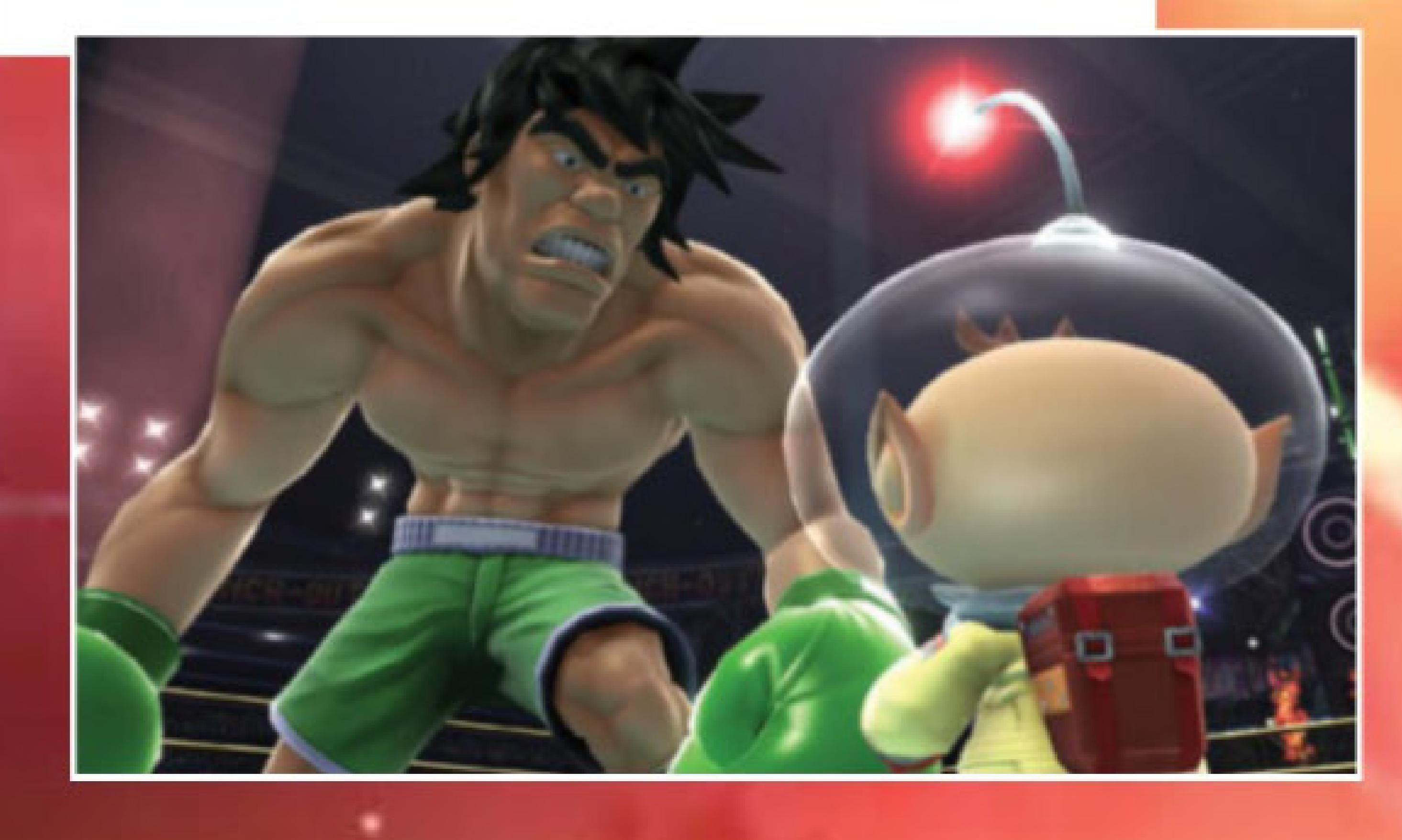
PORTABLE PUNCH

■ THE FIRST of the two versions out of the gate, the 3DS has the trickier task of convincing *Smash Bros.* zealots that the game can be translated to the handheld system. While it does a successful job of bringing the speed and responsiveness to 3DS, where it falters is down to the hardware. The original 3DS screen compresses the image to such a detrimental effect that it can be difficult to keep track of the action, while the smaller buttons are cramp-inducing. If you're going to get *Smash Bros.* on 3DS, make sure you have the XL version.



BEST. CHARACTER. EVER.

■ AFTER BRIEFLY trying out the latest additions to the character roster, it's safe to say that Little Mac is by far the most capable of the new contenders. Boasting an impressive pugilistic prowess and a power meter that unleashes a one-hit KO when charged up, he'll be a knockout with fans when the game is released.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS, Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Bandai Namco, Sora
Release: 3 October/Late 2014
Genre: Beat-'em-up
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Founded in 2005 by former HAL Labs member Masahiro Sakurai, the Japanese studio was originally set up as an agency that would contract out Sakurai as a freelance designer. Sora and Sakurai's current project is the latest iteration of the developer's own *Super Smash Bros.* co-developed with Bandai Namco.

High Point

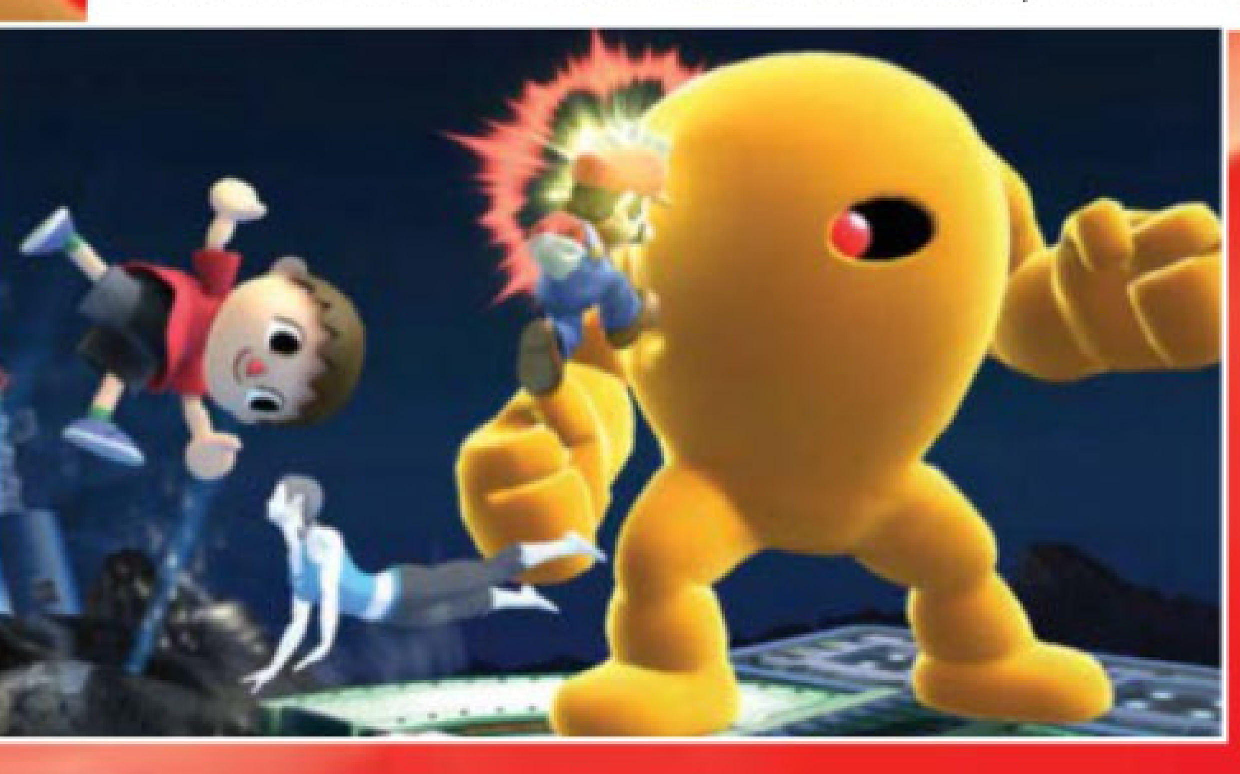
While not the high point in the series (that accolade goes to *Melee*), *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* is laudable for its expansion online and for the huge amount of customisation features that flesh out an exceptional brawler.

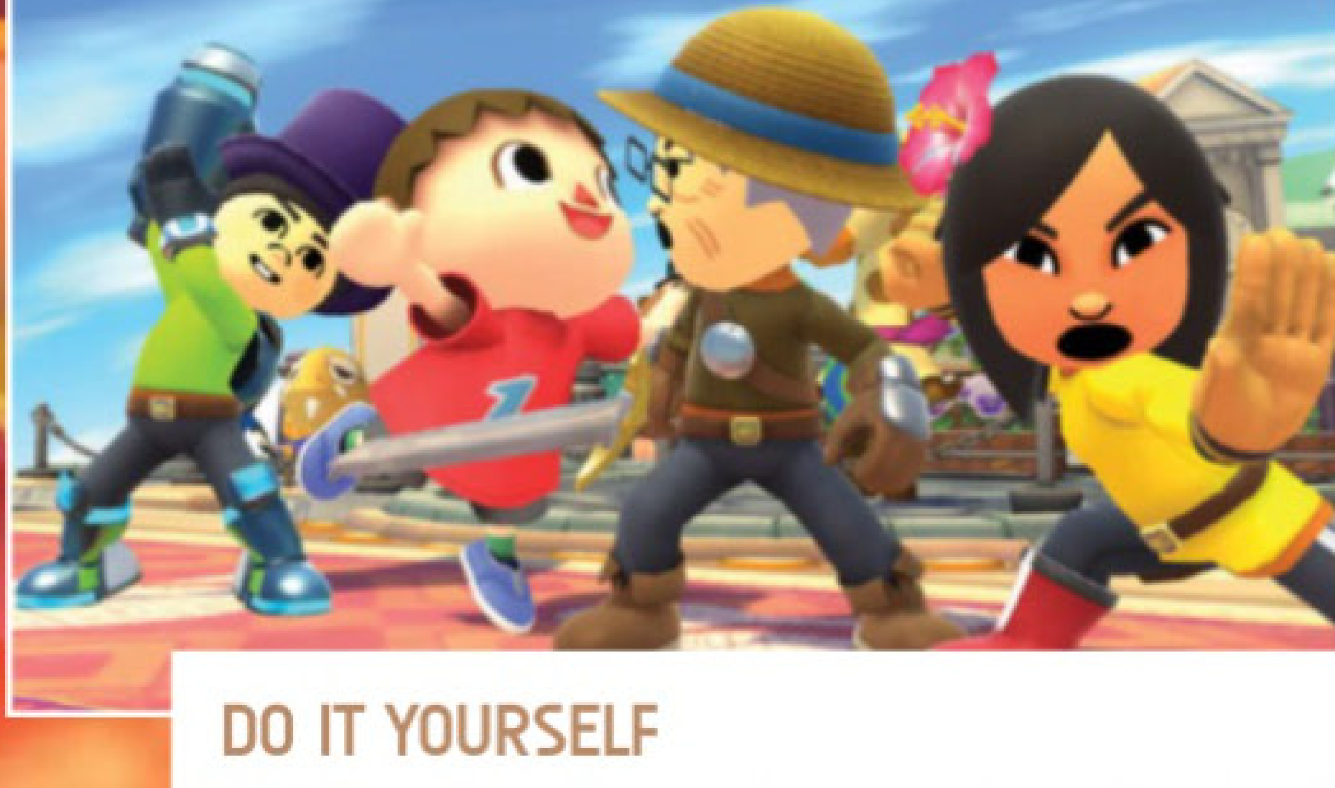
Developer History

Super Smash Bros.
2014 [3DS, Wii U]
Kid Icarus: Uprising
2012 [3DS]
Super Smash Bros. Brawl
2008 [Wii]
Meteos
2005 [Nintendo DS]

STAGE FRIGHT

■ ONE OF the most impressive features is Sakurai's continued ability to create dynamic fighting arenas by utilising concepts native in some of the characters' own games. *Mega Man 2*'s Wily Castle unleashes a Yellow Devil that terrorises players during battle, a hazard that can take out players that stray too close but be defeated with enough focused attacks. It's a hugely inventive addition and a mere hint at what tricks Sakurai has up his sleeve.





DO IT YOURSELF

■ WHERE YOU could customise stages in previous *Smash* entries, the 3DS and Wii U sequel will be the first to enable you to create your own character. This isn't just through the recently-announced Mii Fighters, but even with traditional characters. You're able to customise characters like Mario and Link with equipment buffs and choose from a selection of moves to make the character your own. However, you can only use these characters when playing with friends.

"The developer taps into that intrinsic dread associated with the murky depths, leading towards some horrific encounters with the drowned souls of the damned"

Fatal Frame

■ It wouldn't be a horror story without an easily-spooked protagonist. Luckily, it seems like she's more on the ball than her cinematic counterparts, and is more of a major player in events, rather than a passive onlooker.

CONCEPT ■ A terrified schoolgirl and her friends take a journey to a mountain inhabited by the souls of the dead, their only protection a film-based camera and their wits… hipsters.

Or, in Japanese, Fatal Frame: The Black Haired Shrine Maiden

Japanese horror fiction tends to focus on both the supernatural and the natural more than its Western stablemates, which continue to operate in isolated places, factories, mental hospitals, the urban. Japan tends towards the more naturally mysterious – the humid forests that make up its mainland, the mountains that dominate its skylines, the places where domestic spirits are trapped. Modern technology and lifestyles can't protect people from the ancient spirits that populate Japanese mythology, and this vulnerability acutely affects more Japanese horror than you'd think. The result leads us to survival horror games that make use of natural elements like water more than their Western counterparts (*Silent Hill: Downpour*, for example)

The reason we bring this up is because the Wii U's *Fatal Frame* will also focus heavily on water, both narratively and graphically. It gives the Wii U a chance to show off its 60fps, 1080p capabilities – not a lot of games have taken advantage of this just yet and, as we're sure the screens on this page will justify, the water effects in the game look absolutely stunning, especially by Wii U standards. It also allows the developer to tap into that intrinsic dread associated with the murky depths, inevitably leading towards some utterly horrific encounters with the drowned souls of the damned. Or something.

We're guessing the eponymous 'Black Haired Shrine Maiden' is the player character Kozukata Yuuri – a mysterious young girl that has the gift (read: curse) of being able to see the souls of those that have passed over to the 'Ghost World'. In the midst of discovering the true extent of her powers, Yuuri discovers she can rescue people's souls if she reaches Mount Hikamiyama at a certain hour of the day, where the departed can be guided across the barrier of living and dead – similarly to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Greek mythology. This is the set-up for what Koei Tecmo promises to be the biggest *Fatal Frame* game ever – one that we imagine will take us to the top of Mount Hikamiyama and back down again, encountering all manner of turgid water-beasts en route. In keeping with the series' roots, players can capture ghosts on an in-game camera (the Wii U gamepad to us) and the whole game will be bolstered by cross-media content in the form of a live-action movie, a novel and a series of manga.

It's an undertaking the series hasn't seen before, and it makes us think that Koei Tecmo has invested a lot more time and effort into the pacing and execution of the story than in previous entries of the game… which will hopefully lead to a final product that isn't just well-realised graphically, but also narratively watertight (and terrifying).

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Koei Tecmo
Release: 27 September (Japan)
Genre: Survival horror
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Despite originating in Japan, the developer/publisher Tecmo has technically disbanded in its home country, operating out of bases in Europe, Canada and America under Koei Tecmo.

Producer History

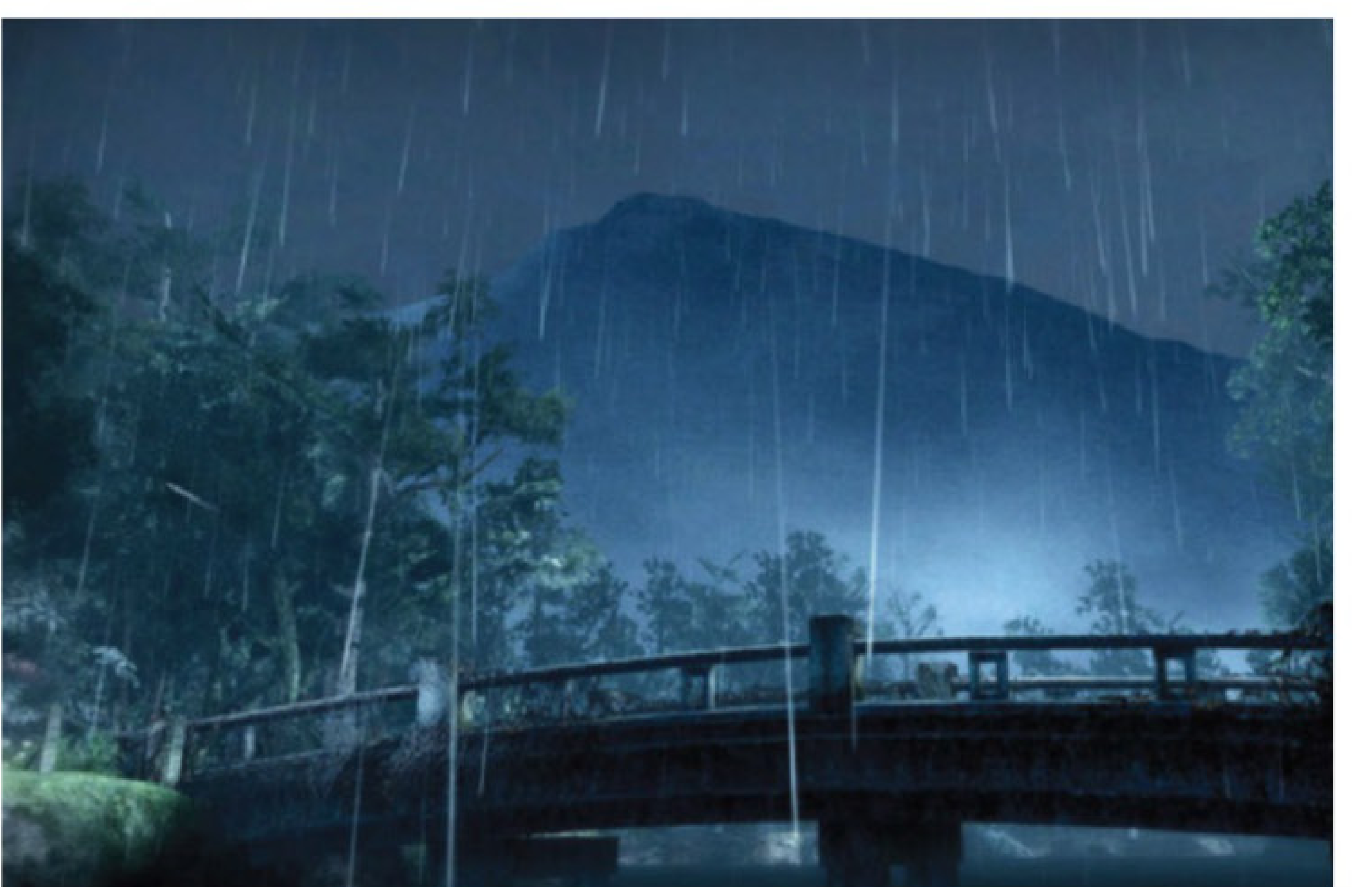
Ninja Gaiden II
Xbox 360 [2008]
Fatal Frame IIII: The Tormented
PS2 [2005]
Monster Rancher
PlayStation [1997]
Dynasty Warriors
PlayStation [1997]

High Point

Monster Rancher seems simple at first: use CDs or other game discs in your PlayStation and get new monsters in-game. Absolutely addictive.



■ Right: Is this a bridge over troubled water? Probably; in all likelihood, there are 80 bloated corpses bumping into each other on the surface.





Right: The game's impressive visuals are powered by the CryEngine. We don't always like realism in games, but *Rapture* seems to be taking it down a fitting path.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: SCEE
Developer: The Chinese Room
Release: Q4 2014
Genre: Interactive fiction
Players: 1

Developer Profile

The Chinese Room gained critical success when it released *Dear Esther* – originally a port of *Half-Life 2* changed to become its own unsettling entity. The Chinese Room has gained a reputation as being one of the more cerebral indie devs, made up of a staff of academics and professional music composers.

Developer History

Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs **2013 [PC]**
Dear Esther **2012 [PC]**
Korsakovia **2009 [PC]**

High Point

Dear Esther was a breath of fresh air in the industry – taking narrative fiction and wrangling it to be relevant for a whole new audience. The mod-cum-standalone release took on almost viral qualities in the way it spread; an organic evolution through word of mouth and critical praise, eventually establishing The Chinese Room as masters of interactive fiction, after only one release.

Everybody's Gone To The Rapture

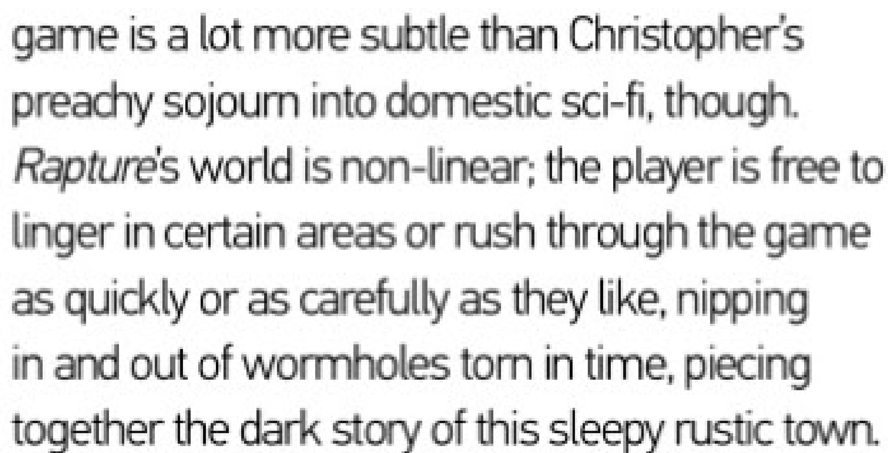
CONCEPT There's no better way to describe this than a game that taps into the age-old human curio – 'What if you were the last person left on Earth?'

Black hole sun, won't you come?

Many of us fantasise about the apocalypse – it's a very modern preoccupation. Where literary Gothicism in the past revolved around modernisation, fear of sexual liberation and the occult, nowadays it revolves around the idea of the end of the world. It's the fear of the unknown, travelling to its ultimate conclusion.

The Chinese Room's high-concept English apocalypse simulator is set in 1984 – an important year in speculative fiction – and takes the player on a first-person tour through the desolate rural countryside, reminiscent of John Christopher's British apocalypse in *The Death Of Grass*. The game is a lot more subtle than Christopher's preachy sojourn into domestic sci-fi, though. *Rapture*'s world is non-linear; the player is free to linger in certain areas or rush through the game as quickly or as carefully as they like, nipping in and out of wormholes torn in time, piecing together the dark story of this sleepy rustic town.

The choice to set the game in 1984 is more pertinent than just making reference to Orwell's dystopian classic, though: the game's writer, Dan Pinchbeck, maintains that it all ties into imbuing the game with a sense of isolation and loneliness by keeping the player in the dark, away from easily accessible sources of information, and by making events that happen throughout the game feel more relevant to you.



Below: In some of the gameplay we've seen, you wander into a house and are privy to an argument through a curious time-rip.



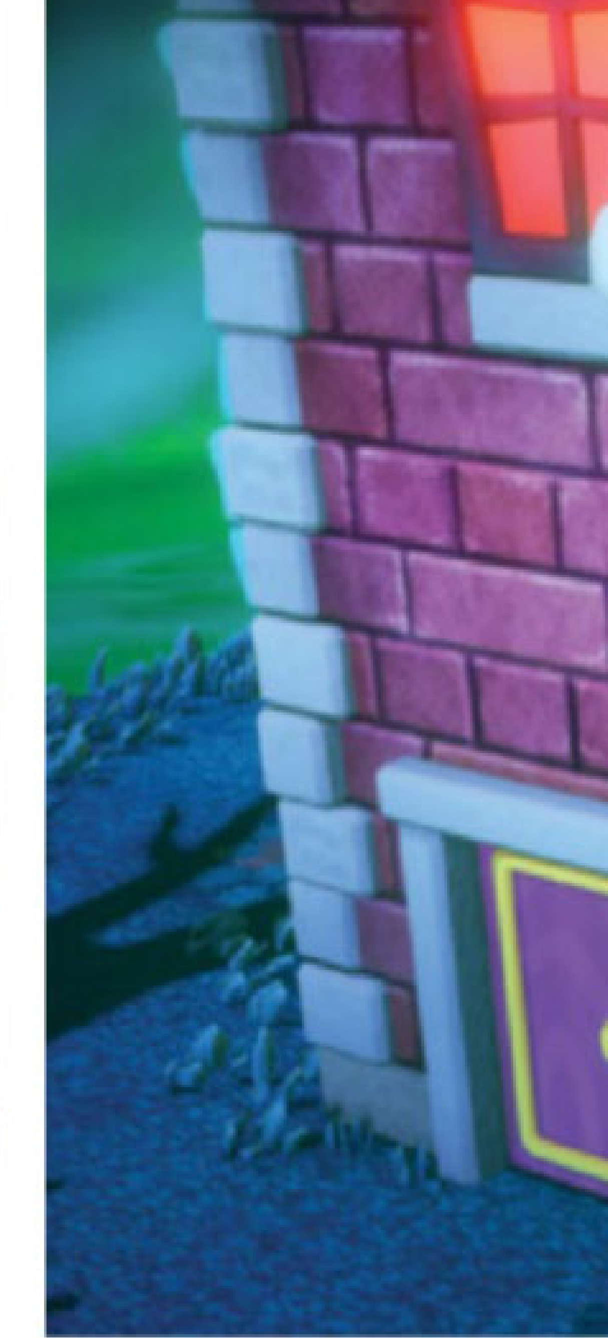
"The only fail state for us is [if] the player doesn't care"
DAN PINCHBECK, FOUNDER & CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE CHINESE ROOM

Conversations with one of five AI entities will happen *once*, as in real life, and if you miss it, you miss it. *Rapture* is – at its core – a mystery game, tasking the player with uncovering why and how the apocalypse happened, and the repercussions this has on the game-world. The game seems to have been built within an engine similar to the choose-your-own-adventure books that were popular in the Eighties; depending on where you go and when, nuances of the story can change and shift, opening up narrative avenues whilst closing others.

Listening in to people and engaging with their individual stories is vital if you want to uncover the labyrinthine narrative paths that lie beneath the game's serene surface. The Chinese Room has utilised a physical way of doing this with the DualShock 4 – 'aim' the pad in a certain direction and you can 'tune' yourself into various sound sources scattered throughout the world, gleaning more information about the mysterious calamity you're living through. *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture* promises to be something unique on the PS4: a considered and refined gaming experience that promises to challenge your preconceptions about what a game actually is… and that's right up our street.



1



2

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker

CONCEPT ■ Nintendo wants to capitalise on its mastery of the 3D platform-puzzler by introducing a new, dedicated IP to long-time Mario supporting character, Toad

He's a fun guy

Back in *Super Mario 3D World*, we were enraptured by the chance we had to play as Captain Toad. His appearance in the game was brief, but it chopped up the pace nicely – zipping around as the toadstool captain was an invigorating change. The popularity of the six *3D World* mini-games prompted Nintendo to revisit everybody's favourite mushroom-man, giving him his own standalone release (almost 30 years after his initial appearance in *Super Mario Bros.*). It's odd to consider that Toad has been knocking around on the side-lines for a while, but only since acquiring the Captain Toad suit in *Super Mario Galaxy* has he achieved an almost cult-like status – his spelunking ensemble somehow making him stand out more in players' minds than he did before. Whatever it is that's heightened the gaming world's opinion of Toad, we're glad it's happened and can only hope it's here to stay.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: Q4 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Who needs an introduction to Nintendo? Originating as a trading card company and establishing itself way back in the 1800s, Nintendo is largely responsible for making videogames what they are today. Between hardware and software, Nintendo has shaped the industry as we know it.

Developer History

Super Mario Galaxy **2007 [Wii]**
Starfox **1993 [SNES]**
The Legend Of Zelda **1986 [NES]**

High Point

There are too many to choose from, really. But in terms of influence, *Super Mario Bros.* did so much to shape how studios developed games that it deserves a mention here.

1 TOAD IS LIKE THE INDIANA JONES OF THE MARIO-VERSE

TOAD IS TAKING his new spelunking role very seriously; the game will mostly revolve around you guiding your little protagonist through a series of miniature mazes and labyrinthine floating islands, with the aim of collecting a variety of mystical and presumably incredibly valuable treasures. The islands in question are all suspended in mid-air and don't have the gravitational properties you'd expect from a platformer – they can distort and twist and rotate at will, quite literally adding a new dimension to platforming.



3



4

5

"It's tricksy, kind of like Kula World on the PSone – but that is a very promising thing for the platforming genre indeed"

2 TOAD HASN'T GOT THE PICKUP PROFICIENCY OF HIS PEERS

SADLY, TOAD HASN'T got the capability to utilise pickups, a la Mario or Luigi. Whether this is because he hasn't got enough body mass to pick them up, or because he simply doesn't understand how tools work (he is a little mushroom man, after all), the fact is that Toad has to come up with other methods of dispatching enemies – turnip tossing being primary among his survivalist arsenal. If plant matter ripped up from the ground isn't enough, your main defence is simply avoidance; a traditional Mario characteristic that *is* returning.

3 YOU'LL SPEND A LOT OF YOUR TIME FALLING DOWN

NOT IN A bad face-plant way, but in a good 'use your body as a bomb' kind of way. The dizzying rotational levels lend themselves to an interesting gravity mechanic that you'll have to master to move from island to island since, basically, Toad can't jump. He can walk and climb, but Captain Toad is a much more slow-paced and considered gameplay experience than other Mario platformers. It's tricksy, kind of like *Kula World* on the PSone – but that is a very promising thing for the genre indeed.

4 CAPTAIN TOAD IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

COMING FROM THE same publisher and developer that brought us *Super Mario Galaxy, Super Mario 3D World, Luigi's Mansion* and a glut of other innovative and forward thinking platformers, it's no surprise that every element of *Captain Toad* feels polished and at the top of its game. But Nintendo has looked outside of its own back catalogue for inspiration with the game; there are comparisons to *Fez* that can't be avoided – the exploitation of the 3D mechanics, the perception tricks, the cutesy protagonist in a cubist world… the influences here are clear.

5 IT MIXES UP THE LEVELS DEFTLY

THE MAIN FORMULA of *Captain Toad* revolves around recognisable *Mario* landscapes wrangled into new cubic 3D realms, but every now and then the game will throw something else interesting at you. Boss fights where you have to platform hop whilst outrunning rising lava and *Pokémon Snap*-esque on-rails mine cart sections are just two deviations from the core formula the game implements. This revised pacing and variety of elements should keep the game from ever becoming too stale or repetitive; our main fear for a game that was essentially born from a series of mini-games in the first place.



Inset: The familiar faces here have also been redesigned for a Western audience – that scarf on Sonic is a Nathan Drake influence, apparently!

Inset: Badnik design seems to have gone all neon-punk, but maybe that'll be fitting in the soft-cornered design of *Sonic Boom*'s world.

Sonic Boom: Rise Of Lyric

CONCEPT ■ A reboot of the franchise that was conceived to act as a companion game to a series of comics and a new *Sonic* TV series

The blue blur spins off again

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: USA
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Big Red Button Entertainment
Release: November 2014
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Big Red Button was founded by ex-Naughty Dog veteran Bob Rafei – who had worked with the developer for 13 years before leaving to set up BRB in 2009. Over a decade of art directing expertise combined with the skills of developers from Heavy Iron, Luxo Flax and High Impact Games paint a promising picture for the fledgling studio, especially if it comes to working within its own IP

***Sonic Boom* is a project split into two halves – seeing a release across the Wii U and 3DS, each game has its own developer and direction.** We got in touch with Big Red Button Entertainment's CEO and creative director Bob Rafei to talk about the Wii U's *Sonic Boom: Rise Of Lyric*, discussing whether the game is more than just a TV tie-in, and what it offers to long-time fans of the *Sonic* franchise…

The Wii U iteration will focus more on combat and exploration than the 'classic' side-scrolling 3DS release. What are you doing for the franchise that hasn't been done before?

We're elevating three other well-known characters to be as equally compelling as Sonic, rather than be subordinate to him in abilities or appeal. We're also building on selective canon traits and combining them to create a classic, epic action-adventure story focused on discovery and fun through personalities and humour. All with the objective of creating an entertaining, collaborative co-op gaming experience.

We're already aware that *Sonic Boom* exists outside of the modern *Sonic* series of games and the canon, but can we expect any specific fan service or nods to old levels or games?

Yes! We looked at the rich universe and history of *Sonic* and began to gravitate towards characters that best fit into our objective to make an epic adventure game. Dr Eggman was a very fun character to explore and created a really fun dynamic to Lyric's straight man super villain vibe. Also there are two fan favourite characters that we're excited to add.

"We looked at the rich universe and history of Sonic and began to gravitate towards characters that best fit into our objective to make an epic adventure game"

BOB RAFEI CEO & CREATIVE DIRECTOR, BIG RED BUTTON ENTERTAINMENT

What has been done to keep melee combat fresh?

Character personalities (through storyline, banter, navigation and combat) was one of our project pillars. We laboured to make sure there was enough depth to encourage player expression in combat via moves that fit characters' personalities; such as speed for Sonic, of course, power for Knuckles, agility for Amy and distance-based gadgets for Tails. This resulted in different tastes of combat to keep things from becoming stale, yet we also wanted familiarity with controls between all four characters, as well as similar enemy pick-and-throw lasso abilities using the EnerBeam. Combat became a sound solution that felt right from early in the development of the title, against the challenge of creating a shared play space built around a legacy character that can run really fast!

There's been a lot of internet chatter regarding 'steroid Knuckles' – have the jokes been taken in good humour?

Absolutely! We thought we might raise some eyebrows with that one! We floated this idea to SEGA and Sonic Team early in development because we felt strongly that new prospective fans needed to recognise Knuckles as the power-based character when looking at the ensemble team for the first time. As a character designer it's really important for me to create characters with varied silhouettes and characterisations especially if the characters will be working as a unit. SEGA and Sonic Team felt the same way and allowed us to run with the significant variation. Given the mostly positive response I'm confident we're on the right track. I think if we didn't garner such a strong reaction we would not have done justice to SEGA to fully take advantage of this unique opportunity to try something different with their characters.

Has there been much communication with the community in the development of *Sonic Boom*?

A lot of people grew up with Sonic and he therefore holds an emotional connection to their past. It was important for us to approach development with respect to the series and its loyal fanbase, but in order to truly do the job asked of us we had to go inward to explore, learn and fail in a safe place to find the best path to success. We looked at the essence of the canon and played with it under the critical guidance of Sonic Team using our character-action game development experience as our compass, which is the only thing you can do at the end of the day as a game developer. Our mission was not to replicate what Sonic Team does so well, but to explore a different experience than what you'd expect from a Sonic game, yet remain loyal to its original DNA.



Inset: Dr Eggman's moustache, rendered here in full HD 3D glory, is probably the best thing we've seen from *Sonic Boom* so far. We wonder if the ends will get singed when his machines blow up...

Inset: When *Sonic Boom* was announced, the internet exploded with comments about Knuckles' huge mass. We're happy to note that was the developer's intention all along.

DEFINING THE UNIVERSE

The *Sonic Boom* experience is split between two core games – the Wii U's *Rise Of Lyric* and the 3DS' *Shattered Crystal*. We asked Bob Rafei how the collaboration with Sanzaru Games (*Shattered Crystal*'s developer) came about. "We were fans of their work and preferred to focus our efforts on the Wii U title. We worked with them to define the rules and guidelines for the *Sonic Boom* universe franchise and consulted with them on character traits and story, but they had full ownership of the Nintendo 3DS title and did a great job to develop a story that fit their needs. We communicated about topics such as consistent behaviours to shared gameplay items."

■ Once the two teams converge, or the game reaches the last 30 seconds of the three minute encounter, you can expect the carnage to be dialled up a notch.



INKLINGS

SPLATOON IS BEING worked on by a junior development team. The thinking behind giving the game to a small, new(ish) team being that it'll hopefully inject some fresh life into Nintendo's traditional publishing schedule. It seems to be working; we can't think of anything quite like *Splatoon* out there, either released or upcoming, and something so multiplayer focused is surely to appeal to the social side of the Wii U. The game should come out just as *Super Smash Bros.* and *Mario Kart 8* start to lose their momentum with younger audiences next year.

■ Above: While the vast majority of the game seems a little Nintendo, a little 'something else', the score screen certainly retains that proudly Japanese Nintendo flavour the company has been so successful in establishing. Right: *Splatoon* is definitely one of the more colourful games we've seen announced recently, and it looks great running at 60fps on the Wii U.



Splatoon

CONCEPT ■ A platoon of splatterers form the core of this vibrant third-person shooter from Nintendo in which the aim of every match is to spread more paint than your opponent.

In which Billy the Squid paints the town red…

When you think of Nintendo and its extensive list of first party games, it's mostly platformers, party games and family-friendly endeavours that tend to malign the traditional gaming philosophy of 'guns, guns, guns'. But, in a brave move by Nintendo's EAD studio, the developer has decided to travel down an alternative third-person shooter route; instead of bullets and your traditional AK-47, though, you'll be equipped with water-pistols filled with multi-coloured ink.

If it sounds a bit odd, that's because it is. *Splatoon* is a departure from Nintendo's traditional style, yet simultaneously a remarkably familiar venture, too: it's effectively a game that tasks you with covering as much of your battlefield (read: canvas) with ink as possible, within a tight three-minute timeframe. The Wii U pad allows you to quickly take a look at the lay of the land and see who's marked their territory where, and you can use your fellow teammates as respawn points if an opponent manages to take you out (leaving a spattering of their own ink in your place as penance for your retreat).

There are two states: on the ground, where you can fire and move slowly around the field, and in the ink (as a squid), which allows for more fluid traversal where enemies can't see your position. Dipping into the ink will also reload your weapon, so it's important to never be caught too far away from a messy reserve of your own colour. Be wary, though: in the ink you can't fire, but you can travel up walls or through grates meaning it's usually best to think ahead before be-squidding yourself for travel. Enemy-coloured terrain will also slow you down substantially when you're not wriggling through the ink, though, making you a sitting duck for any other players that might happen upon you: it's a constant game of weighing up which state is better to be in.

The firing mechanics are a little loose and inaccurate – this isn't a third-person shooter in the vein of *Gears Of War* or something; it's not about scoring headshots or taking out your enemies, but rather about coating the landscape in as much of your own goo as possible. Whilst the gunfire feels loose, it *does* represent the liquid nature of the projectiles you're firing, and actually makes the game stand out a little from other third-person shooters in the field. Bombs and bazookas can be unlocked as power-ups, too – each having a large enough blast radius to be useful outside of just targeting enemy players.

/// All these elements combine to make a surprisingly tactical game that requires an awareness of your team-mates if you want to come out on top. If, for example, the enemy team creates a direct line of their paint straight to your base, you're going to want two or three allies to lay down covering fire to assure you don't get hemmed in (which basically means certain death) while you mosey on ahead and try and cut off their retreat by painting over their beeline. Adversely, if you're more of a camper and prefer to sit back and cover as much of your own half in paint while your team wreaks merry havoc up front, you also have the option of stealthing up the side somewhere and taking enemy players by surprise, but risk leaving your half exposed. It's a satisfying change-up of the rock-paper-scissors regime that so many third-person shooters rely on, and one that we're keen to see exploited by cunning players.

> "Splatter enemies and claim your turf as the ink-spewing, squid-like characters called Inklings in Nintendo's new third-person action shooter"
> PRESS RELEASE, NINTENDO

Our hands-on impressions of the game have certainly showed us that Nintendo's foray into the realm of oft-requested new IP is certainly off to a good start, though we wonder about the longevity of a shooting game designed so carefully on the family-friendly line: if *Splatoon* proves it has more to offer than a quick couple of games like *Plants Vs Zombies: Garden Warfare* then it's sure to make a substantial impact and become another favourite in the stalwart Nintendo roster.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: Spring 2015
Genre: Third-person shooter
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Reputed for its family-friendly back catalogue, Nintendo knows how to play it safe and innovate at the same time, typically relying on established IP to use as a solid base to build new ideas around. *Splatoon* is a welcome deviation from the norm.

Developer History

Mario Kart 8
2014 [Wii U]
Wii Sports Club
2013 [Wii U]
Animal Crossing: New Leaf
2012 [3DS]

High Point

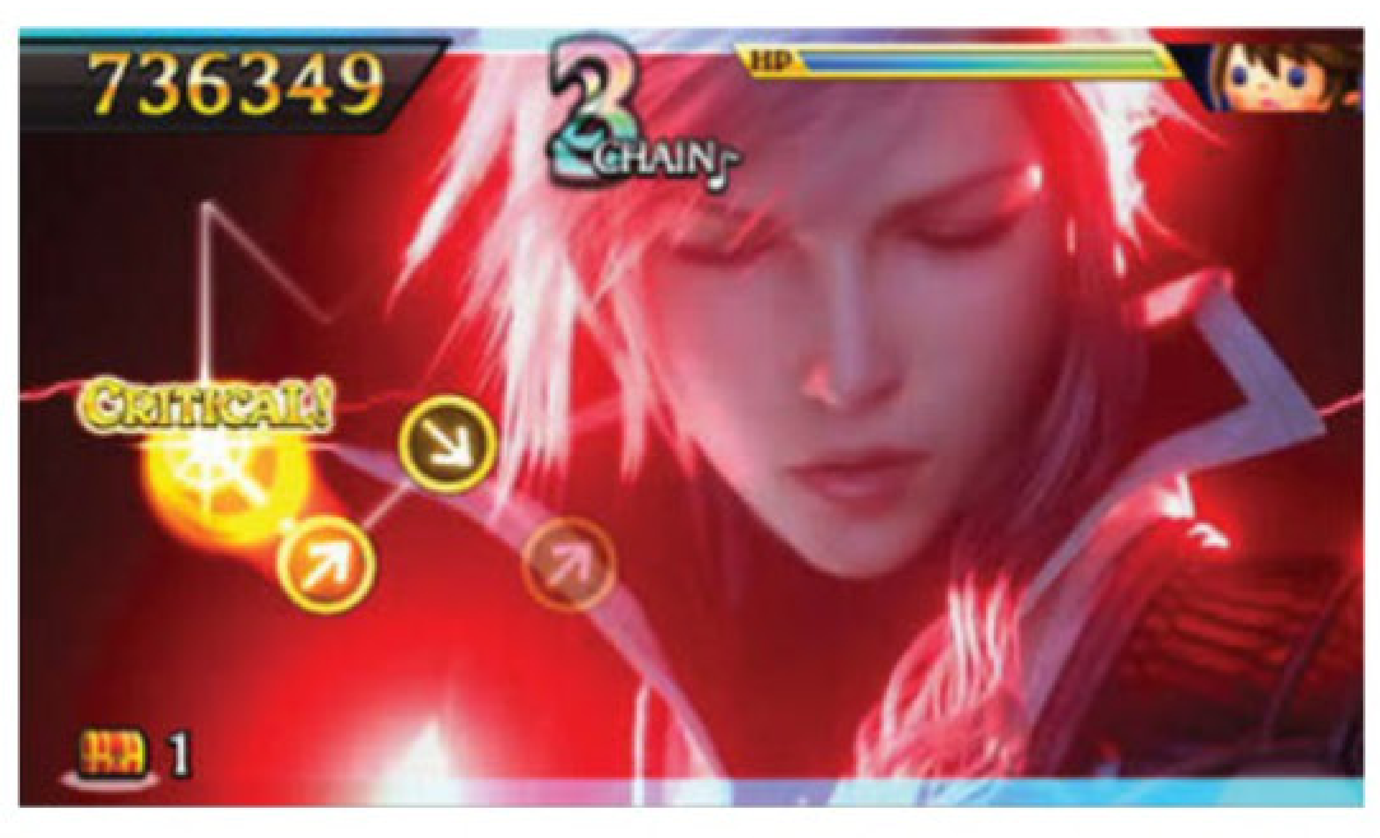
Mario Kart 8 has been Nintendo's biggest release of the last few years, and bolstered Wii U sales. It's not surprising, considering the game is a continuation of the watertight formula.





■ Left: There aren't just a range of offensive weapons; there's also a slew of other paint-related paraphernalia.

■ Above: Event mode sees your song of choice play out against the series' most recognisable CGI cutscenes, but unless you're playing on the easiest difficulty you won't have much time to admire the scenery.













Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call

CONCEPT ■ Definitive version of the rhythm-action game based on *Final Fantasy*'s extensive catalogue of evocative soundtracks.

Maintaining composure

Last year, the work of esteemed *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu reached number three in Classic FM's Top 300 Hall of Fame; this year he was sandwiched between Beethoven and Elgar at number seven. Live *Final Fantasy*-themed orchestral shows regularly take place across the globe, while the original *Theatrhythm: Final Fantasy* stands as both an excellent rhythm-action game and a fine example of the kind of interactive celebration of a franchise unique to this medium.

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call further taps into the evident passion that there is for the series' aural treasure trove with a staggering 221 tracks, an expanded character roster and the introduction of an all new Versus mode. This last sits alongside a cinematic Event mode, race-to-the-finish Field mode and the RPG-lite battles in which damage dealt to opponents is determined by how precisely you can follow the on-screen taps, holds and swipes.

Square Enix producer Ichiro Hazama attributes the appeal of the concept to two simple factors, "The songs themselves have great quality and stand up on their own, no question. Also, because they are used in games, I think that when people hear these songs they remember a particular scene or moment in the game."

However, as well as drawing on some of the series' most iconic moments, there are also plenty of hidden gems and so for every Squall and Rinoa ballroom dance or One-Winged Angel there are a dozen tracks taken from the lesser known but equally cherished series spin-offs. There's a strong sense of joy to be had in rediscovering a number of forgotten tracks. Despite appearing to be a highly niche title, *Theatrhythm*'s biggest strength is grounded in its rhythm-action roots and how mesmeric it is to pick up and play – at least on Easy difficulty, a brief glimpse at the most challenging difficulty level is a bewildering blur of symbols that will require a Zen-like state to master.

With a Versus mode that sports a number of randomised power-ups with which to bemuse your opponent and a number of customisable maps that can be exchanged via Street Pass, *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call* revels in its social side just as much as its harder levels challenge lone rhythm-action veterans.

"What I've tried to do here is make the definitive version of *Final Fantasy Theatrhythm*; I don't intend to make any others," says Hazama. As for the series' classical Hall of Fame success, the producer chuckles,"I can imagine an award ceremony and you have Beethoven and Mozart and then Nobuo Uematsu would come along; I think he'd probably turn to the others and say 'Sorry about this'. It's amazing that fans would club together to make that happen but it's perhaps going a little too far!"

> "An element of luck comes into the Versus mode but for a rhythm game it makes sense to keep it light-hearted"
>
> ICHIRO HAZAMA, SQUARE ENIX

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Indieszero
Release: 19 September (Japan: Out now)
Genre: Rhythm-Action
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Founded in 1997, Indieszero has worked on a number of eclectic titles for Nintendo, Square Enix and Namco Bandai. Rhythm-action sits alongside cookery titles, calligraphy training and a guide to the Louvre.

Developer History

NES Remix
2013 [Wii U]
Theatrhythm: Final Fantasy
2012 [3DS]
Electroplankton
2005 [DS]

High Point

Indieszero's catalogue features an array of unique experiences, but its 2012 *Theatrhythm: Final Fantasy* proved the developer was capable of marrying its gameplay concepts to a solid and rhythm-action base.



Above: Those who haven't played a lot of *World Of Warcraft* might not notice much of a difference with the new race textures and animations, but those who have been playing for a while will likely be giddy with excitement about it.

World Of Warcraft: Warlords Of Draenor

CONCEPT The latest expansion pack for Blizzard's behemoth MMO brings with it a whole new feature in the guise of your very own customisable fortress.

For the bored

***Mists Of Pandaria*, for all its novelty, style and redirection, just did not resonate with *World Of Warcraft* players.** So *Warlords Of Draenor* is a smart move by Blizzard, casting aside the cutesy appeal of furry pandas in favour of something more in tune with the game's naysayers – namely ugly orcs and their desire to rule Azeroth. Garrosh Hellscream has been denounced as Warchief of the Horde, escaped captivity at the hands of the Pandaren and – thanks to the assistance of a renegade Bronze Dragon – returned to an older time. To Draenor, in fact, pre-*Burning Crusade*.

It's a clever decision for the huge MMO, however, returning to its roots of sorts by tackling an era of the franchise's history primarily covered in the *Warcraft* RTS games. It's an untapped goldmine of lore for Blizzard, at least in terms of many of its *World Of Warcraft* players; those unaware will have something distinctly *Warcraft* to tackle, while veterans will get an unexpected sense of nostalgia. That's not to say it's a rehash of content, however. Far from it. Draenor may be Outland before the war that ravaged it, but you wouldn't know it to look at it. Shadowmoon Valley, for example, is much more akin to a Night Elf enclave than the luminous green, elemental-stricken land we remember it from *The Burning Crusade*. But, moreover, there's a far greater sense of detail and grandeur that Blizzard has since learnt. Though some of the alpha and beta cutscenes are expectedly lacking a spot of pizazz, there's a greater sense of a story to tell here. It's something that *World Of Warcraft* is in desperate need of, and showed signs of growing with when Blizzard released *Mists Of Pandaria*. Environments maintain that stylised beauty the aging MMO has always known, too, but with a larger number of peripheral details and effects. It's perhaps unnoticeable without comparison, but makes for a far more visually driven experience – and that only helps maintain that sense of place.

And while we're talking of the game's age, it's worth drawing attention to the much-touted new character models for all the older races.

> "Hopefully [garrisons will] encourage you to explore every facet of the game and build that part up"
>
> STEVE BURKE, BLIZZARD



HOME SWEET HOME

CONSIDERING THE DECADE of questing that you've done to save Azeroth, it seems bizarre that it's only now that you'll actually see any recompense. As part of the story through *Warlords Of Draenor* you'll gain access to your own garrison. It's instanced, but allows you to collect resources and use them to customise your fortress. It'll be familiar to anyone who made use of the farm in *Mists Of Pandaria*, but the twist is a long list of missions that can be completed by hired followers – not unlike *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*'s guild missions. It's not game-changing, admittedly, but there's a bit more meat to it than the farming of *MoP* and could even keep you going after you've hit level 100.





Above: Draenor is a more tranquil area than the Outland it later became. The emphasis on the Warlords of Draenor (various orc chieftains) means there's an antagonist to each area. Below: The new forestling enemies make an appearance in one of the earlier quests of the expansion, and could rival murlocs for their irritation.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Blizzard
Developer: In-house
Release: 20 December
Genre: MMO
Players: Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Blizzard's heritage is as prestigious as they come. It has managed to achieve that ever-so-rare combination of decades of development (the company is 20 this year, excluding earlier years under the name Silicon & Synapse) and a long list of reputable, well-loved and – in many cases – innovative titles under its belt.

Developer History

Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft **2014 [PC]**
World Of Warcraft **2004 [PC]**
Diablo **1996 [PC]**
Warcraft: Orcs & Humans **1994 [PC]**

High Point

The release of *World Of Warcraft* is what turned the developer into a household name and gave MMOs a template to follow.

Currently not all the races have had their models, animations and textures overhauled, but those that have are looking exceptional. It says a lot for the MMO that it'd often be preferable to keep that vile new helmet on display than see the hideous grimace contained within, but these rebuilt character models really help make *World Of Warcraft* feel modern again. Mostly it's thanks to their animations with subtle lip movements, the slight sway of hips and hair or – perhaps most important of all – the all-new dancing animation. It takes one of the fantastic things about playing a Pandaren, and carries it over to all the other races. It's surprising how drastic the change is.

/// In terms of gameplay, however, *Warlords Of Draenor* sticks very much to its template. Quests are unchanged from their usual arbitrary monster slaughter, and it's not yet clear whether this will be detrimental to the overall expansion experience when it releases later this year. With that said, there is a greater emphasis on the general flow of questing; it's almost single-player in the manner that it's driven in. But this is, we'd gather, to keep it simple for newcomers – because what is most interesting about our time with the expansion pack so far is how keen it is to teach.

With our public server template characters we were gradually introduced to new spells and abilities to better ease new players into the shoes of a level 90 character, while pop-ups explaining systems that previous *WoW* players would already know about came at a steady rate. By including a level 90 character boost in with *Warlords Of Draenor* it seems Blizzard is clearly, yet carefully, targeting a fresh audience for the MMO, and that could well lead to renewed vigour for the decade-old game.



Above: There's a quaint bit early on in the garrison creation segment that fans of the original RTS *Warcraft* games will appreciate.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

PERSONA 4 ARENA ULTIMAX

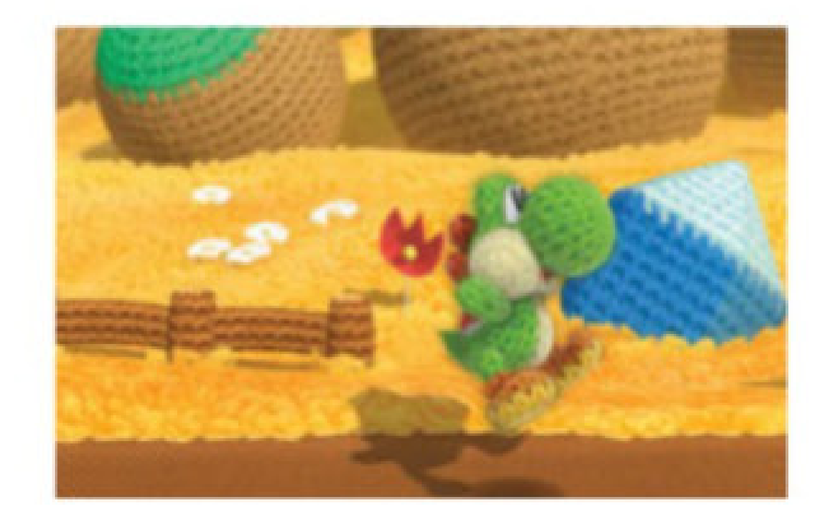
Format: PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: Arc System Works
ETA: 30 September (USA)



THE SEQUEL to the excellent *Persona 4 Arena* is soon to hit US shores, and hopefully won't be region-locked on PS3 like before. Adding a bunch of new characters, almost the entire main cast of both *Persona 3* and *4* will now be playable. The huge, visual-novel style story mode will follow on from the last game and the great fighting gameplay comes from the genre masters at Arc System Works. No word on a European release yet, though.

YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD

Format: Wii U
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Good-Feel
ETA: Q2 2015



WE HATE to use the term charming when referring to videogames, but if any game has earned that title, then it's this one. Using the same engine as Good-Feel's *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, it's a beautiful new look for the series. Gameplay seems to be standard *Yoshi's Island* fare, but as this is the first home-console entry in the series since 1998 on the N64 there is the chance to set a new benchmark for the franchise going forward.

POKEMON OMEGA RUBY & ALPHA SAPPHIRE

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Game Freak
ETA: 28 November



IT'S BEEN under a year since *Pokémon X* and *Y* and already we have two new games on the way. While the decision to remake *Ruby* and *Sapphire* isn't particular surprising considering past business strategy, the polarising reception the games get within the Pokémon community led some to wonder if it would ever happen. Still, more Pokémon is guaranteed to sell buckets regardless of how much is actually new.

MIGHTY NO. 9

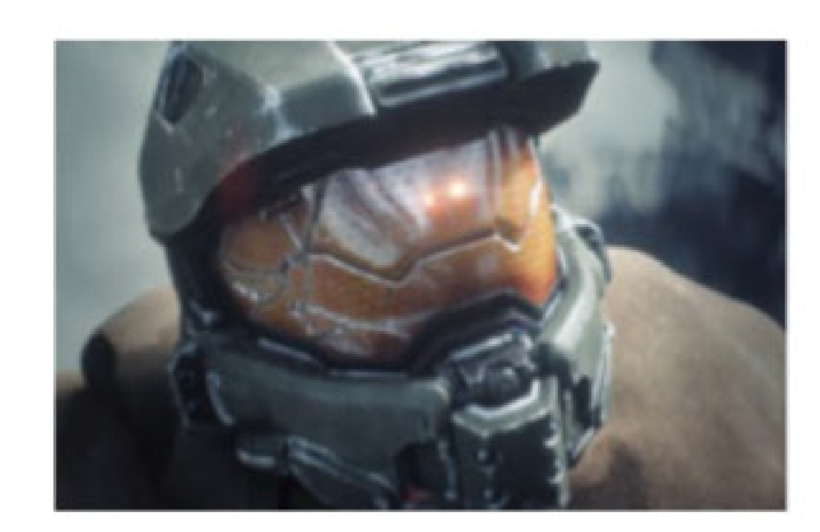
Format: Multi
Publisher: Comcept
Developer: In-house
ETA: April 2015



KEIJI INAFUNE'S new 'Mega Man' game has started a second crowd-funding campaign to add even more features and bonuses. Considering the initial Kickstarter campaign made $4million, this is clearly an ambitious project. Turns out a lot of people still really like Mega Man, and while the name might be different, brief glimpses at gameplay suggest this is absolutely a spiritual successor to the adventures of the blue bomber.

HALO 5: GUARDIANS

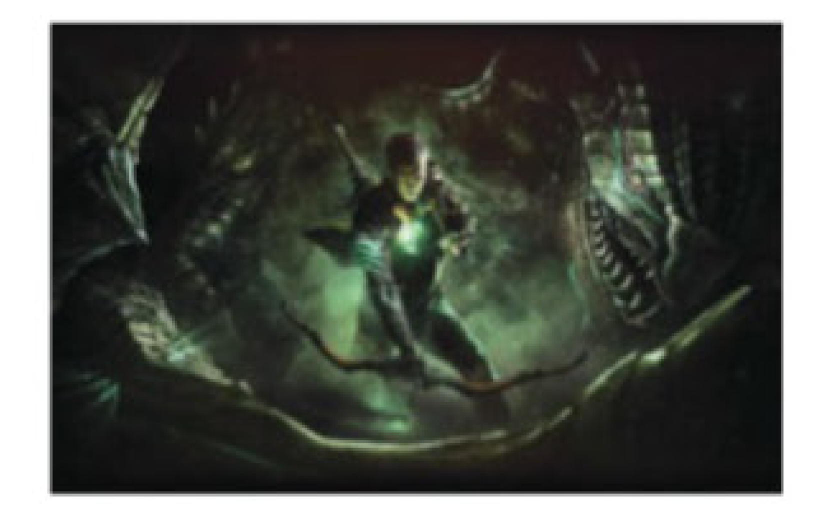
Format: Xbox One
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: 343 Industries
ETA: Q4 2015



MASTER CHIEF'S adventures inexplicably continue for a fifth chapter – the guy must be getting pretty tired. While Bungie is no longer on board, the first *Halo* game on Xbox One is still huge. *Halo 4* was a great first step for 343 Industries, and seeing what it can do on Xbox One is enticing. Gamers who buy the *Master Chief Collection* will get a pass to the *Halo 5* multiplayer beta, scheduled to start in December.

SCALEBOUND

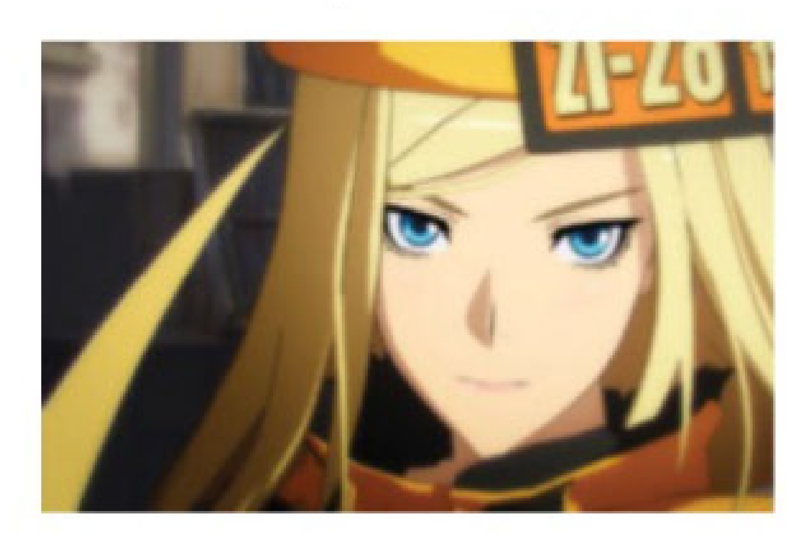
Format: Xbox One
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Platinum Games
ETA: TBC



PLATINUM GAMES is adept at spanning multiple consoles, with exclusives on Wii U, PS3 and now Xbox One. All we've seen so far of *Scalebound* is one CG trailer, but even that suggests Platinum is sticking to what it does best: crazy, over-the-top action games. *Scalebound* will transport you to a distant, hostile world where you will both fight and team up with huge, formidable dragons and other beasts.

GUILTY GEAR XRD -SIGN-

Format: PS4, PS3
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Arc System Works
ETA: Holiday 2014



IS *GUILTY GEAR XRD* the best looking game we've ever seen? We've never seen cel-shading that looks this good: it truly is a two-dimensional cartoon in three-dimensional space. The console version will have at least one exclusive character, but it sounds like more secrets are on the horizon. It's been a decade since the last properly new *Guilty Gear* game, so *Xrd* can't arrive fast enough.

CRAWL

Format: PC
Publisher: Powerhoof
Developer: In-house
ETA: Summer 2014

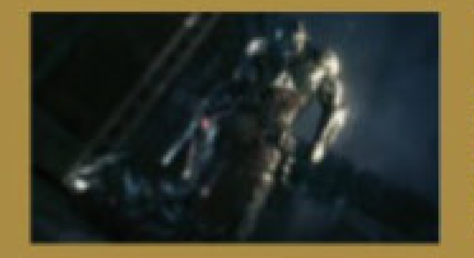


CRAWL IS a competitive multiplayer dungeon crawler where you control the hero and up to three of your friends control the monsters that want to kill you. Kill the hero and you immediately take their place, suddenly making you the hunted. You'll level up, increase your stats and find new gear all in a 30-minute session – it's a dungeon crawler on speed, spliced with the DNA of a death-match multiplayer game.



CANCELLED – Volition's Western (PS4, Xbox One)

Volition, the studio behind *Saint's Row*, was working on a "post-apocalyptic Western". The game, codenamed "Zeus", was set in Rio in the wake of a post-apocalyptic disaster, but has sadly been dropped due to lack of time and resources.

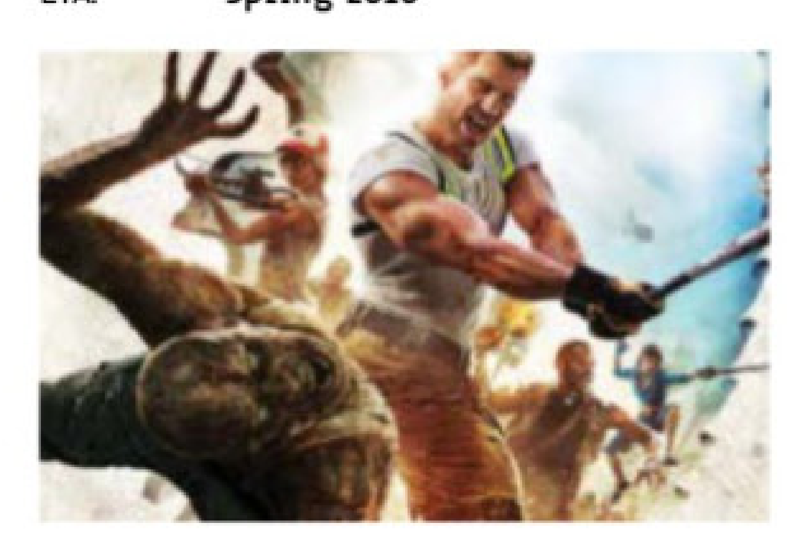


DELAYED – Batman: Arkham Knight (Multi)

Originally set for this year, *Batman: Arkham Knight* is now set for early 2015 so Rocksteady can make the game "the best experience it can be." A shame for sure, but a wait we don't mind undertaking.

DEAD ISLAND 2

Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Deep Silver**
Developer: **Yager Development**
ETA: **Spring 2015**



TECHLAND IS busy with *Dying Light*, so little-known German developer Yager steps up to the plate, a studio best known for the divisive *Spec Ops: The Line*. Described as more vibrant and light-hearted than its predecessors (which weren't exactly serious), hopefully *Dead Island 2* will be just as much fun to play alone as it is with friends. For better or worse, we don't expect it to be particularly similar to *Spec Ops*.

THE FOREST

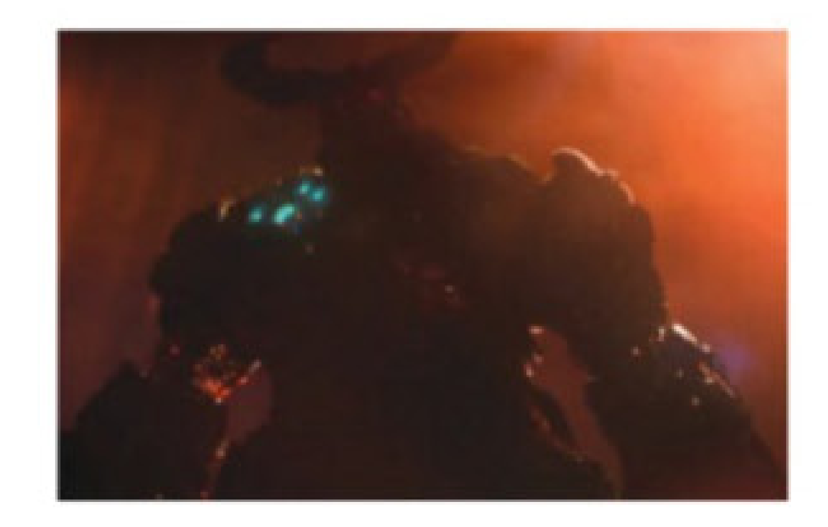
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Endnight Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC**



ANOTHER OF the many PC games inspired by *DayZ*, *The Forest* once again tasks you with surviving in a bleak, hostile environment populated by creatures that want to kill you. However, unlike *DayZ* and most of its ilk, *The Forest* is a strictly single-player experience, more narrative-led and atmospheric as a result. It looks and sounds utterly terrifying, and is currently in alpha state, if you fancy giving it a try.

DOOM

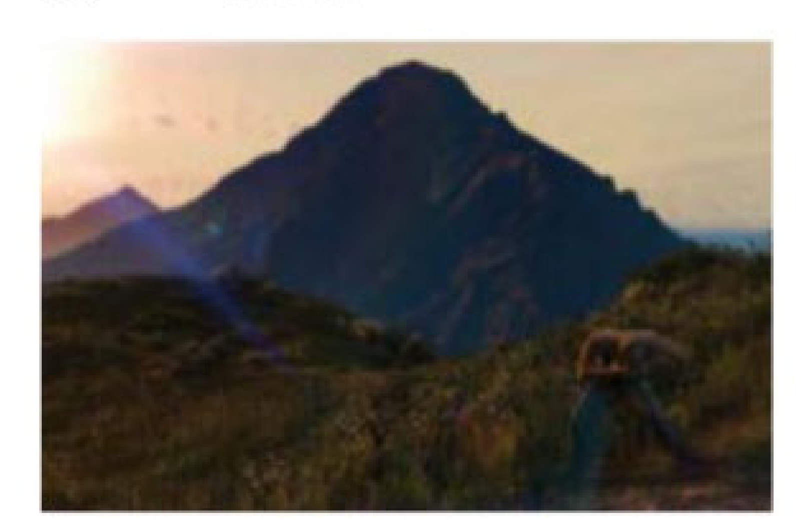
Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Bethesda**
Developer: **Id Software**
ETA: **TBC**



DOOM 3 is ten years old – how time flies. Id has been hinting at a sequel since 2007, announcing the game in 2008, but since then things have been quiet, with development apparently being started entirely from scratch in 2011 after the current version was deemed mediocre. Purchasers of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* will have received beta access to *Doom 4*, now just named *Doom*, the first sign in a while that it is still on the way.

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

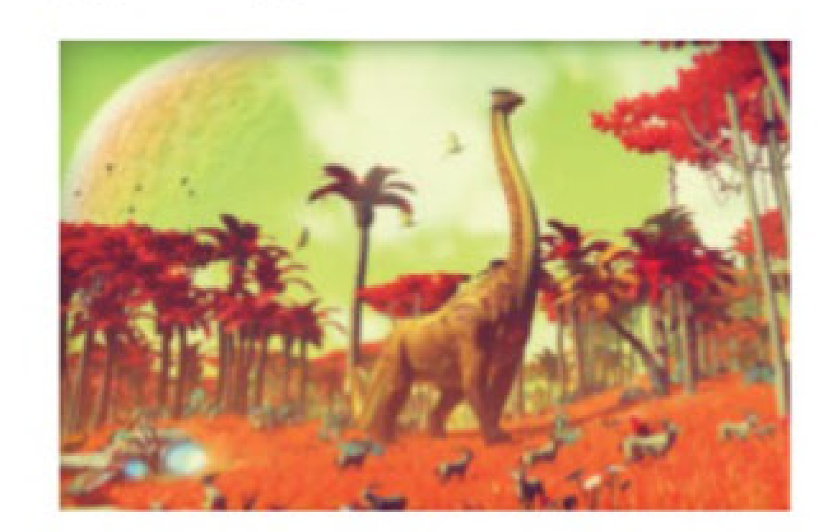
Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Rockstar Games**
Developer: **Rockstar North**
ETA: **Q4 2014**



WHO COULD have possibly predicted a next-gen re-release of one of the highest grossing videogames of all time? Most people, to be fair, and for good reason: it makes total sense whichever way you look at it. Many skipped *GTA V* last year in anticipation of exactly this happening, and plenty out there are big enough fans to buy the game again for the sake of better graphics. It's going to make millions all over again.

NO MAN'S SKY

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Hello Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC**



THIS GAME has everyone talking. A procedurally-generated space adventure with limitless potential, *No Man's Sky* has looked phenomenal in trailers, but we can't help but wonder if it will deliver. If it does, we really could be looking at one of the definitive games of this generation. We've always wanted a game to capture that pure, childish wonder of exploration. *No Man's Sky* seems right on course.

SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT AND THE RAIDERS OF THE LOST QUARK

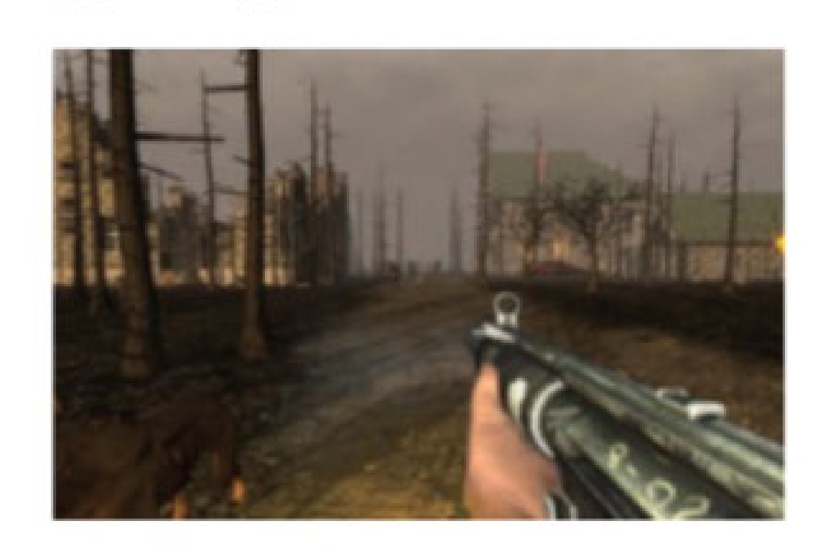
Format: **iOS, Android, PC**
Publisher: **Team17**
Developer: **Italic Pig**
ETA: **Q3 2014**



HOW MANY games do you know that are based on quantum physics? It's not a crowded genre, so *Schrödinger's Cat And The Raiders Of The Lost Quark* is getting in on the ground floor. A mixture of platformer, puzzle and sandbox, the game revolves around combining quarks to create different kinds of matter, each serving a different purpose to help you advance. It sounds perfect for budding scientists.

7 DAYS TO DIE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **The Fun Pimps**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC**




YET ANOTHER first-person survival sim, *7 Days To Die* sets itself apart with a complex crafting system that involves elements of tower defence. Players are encouraged to build their own shelters to survive, and the world is fully destructible. Basically, imagine a mixture of *DayZ* and *Minecraft*, and you've got the gist of it. It's a good mixture, yes, but one that we've seen plenty of over the last year or so.

THE ESCAPISTS

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Team17**
Developer: **Mouldy Toof Studios**
ETA: **TBC**



REQUIRING A combo of routine, forethought and NPC interaction to successfully stage a prison breakout, *The Escapists* seems like a throwback to late Nineties PC games. You'll have to follow strict orders to avoid suspicion, all the while planning for your breakout, coercing fellow inmates and finding and crafting items that will help you escape. It's due for Early Access on Steam soon.



CIRCUIT BREAKER

FORZA HAS NOW FULLY ESTABLISHED ITS OPEN-WORLD SERIES, SO WE MET UP WITH PLAYGROUND GAMES' CREATIVE DIRECTOR, RALPH FULTON, TO DISCUSS THE NEWEST FORZA HORIZON ENTRY

2012's *Forza Horizon* used the fictional Horizon festival as its setting – an interesting narrative choice that allowed the player to easily differentiate the Grand Prix feeling of the main *Forza* games from the open-world offshoot of the *Horizon* series. The Horizon festival gave freedom to its players, and lead them to end up in Hollywood-esque chases with helicopters and planes – a distinct departure from the serious simulator feel of the original *Forza* games.

Forza Horizon was set in the mountainous (yet varied) state of Colorado, allowing the player the freedom of the open roads with impressive, natural vistas augmenting the experience. With *Forza Horizon 2*, developer Playground Games is travelling to southern Europe; a location that promises as much variety and natural beauty as its predecessor. But considering a lot of the tracks you'll find in the mainstay *Forza* games can be found in European climbs, what exactly is differentiating the *Horizon* games from their spiritual forebears?

"That's a great question," replies Ralph Fulton – *Horizon 2*'s creative director. "I think [*Forza* and *Horizon*] are very complementary experiences. They are both identifiably *Forza* games, there are certain values that both must have and must share. For me, *Forza Motorsport* is a serious game. It's about simulation, it's about precision and mastery. About really learning your breaking points and as such its quite a 'lean in' experience.

"We take the opposite approach [at Playground Games]. *Forza Horizon* is quite a 'lean back' game. It's fun, it's laid back, it's relaxing. We try not to prescribe exactly what you are going to do, we really leave it up to you. Freedom is one of the fundamental



principles that we always talk about. That word is written on the walls of our studio – literally *on* the walls of our studio – because it is just a part of our DNA. We want to give you a game that's full of experiences, full of cars, full of content and say, knock yourself out. Do what you want in the order than you want. That for me is the principle difference between the two."

★

THIS DESIGN PHILOSOPHY CAN BE FOUND IN WHAT THE GAME IS OFFERING – NO LESS THAN 200 CARS WILL BE AVAILABLE AT LAUNCH – BY LOOKING further afield than its standard *Forza* sibling for engineering inspiration: rather than just horsepower-hungry sports cars, players will be able to find hot hatches, rally cars, and trucks to go out and explore the wilderness in. This diversity in cars is vital when you consider how much effort Playground has put into creating *Horizon 2*'s expansive world.

"The design process starts way, way, way back in development," explains Fulton. "First of all, it is all about selecting the location. We loved Colorado (I still like going back to *Forza Horizon*), but France and Italy were two locations we actually considered separately for the first game. For this one, we thought, 'Let's just put them together! They're adjacent, and now that we've got more power, we can build a bigger world, let's do it!'"

The Xbox One version of *Forza Horizon 2* is being constructed on the same engine as *Forza 5*, while the 360 version (handled separately by Sumo Digital – the developer behind *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*) will use the original *Forza Horizon* engine. The more powerful tech on the Xbox One is allowing Playground Games to achieve the vision it set out with when it first started development on the original spin-off *Forza Horizon*.

"We sent teams out to research the place – which was for research visually, but also in terms of the nuances of the roads," says Fulton. "We sent level designers out to learn about how the roads camber, how they undulate, with a view to bring that [information] back and get that level of authenticity into *Horizon 2*. Because it has to be fun to just drive around." The popularity of open-world racing games hasn't dwindled, and even through the last three years there have been enough triple-A releases in the field to keep obsessive fans ticking over. But where *Need For Speed: Rivals*, *Test Drive: Unlimited* and Ivory Tower/Ubisoft's upcoming *The Crew* all operate in the American wilderness, *Forza Horizon 2* is offering something categorically different, and the studio has made sure to comb through everything its players want with attention and dedication to make sure *Forza Horizon 2* stands out from the impressive competition.

"What we're really expanding this time, is the area you can drive in. It was all about roads in Colorado, now it's all about fields, and hills, and forests, and it adds a completely new dimension to the game," explains Fulton. "It's something we wanted to achieve right from the start, but we didn't fully understand what it meant for our game until quite a way into development and we were like, 'Hang on, this is *amazing*. I can actually drive from place to place as fast as I could drive it.' So new game design ideas just came out of that organically. The cross-country events that you'll see in the final game are all new for

Road Tripping

★ While the likes of *The Crew* and *Need For Speed: The Rivals* focus on the Great American road trip, *Forza Horizon 2* will get to explore the awesome roads of Europe. Here are three trips we'd like to recreate in the game's focused reimagining of Southern Europe…

THE GRAND TOUR
Geneva, Switzerland to Milan, Italy – 500 miles

★ A chance for Playground to really show off its take on mountain landscapes and Italian architecture, The Grand Tour takes drivers from snow-capped mountaintops to uninterrupted stretches of coastline – the twisting Apennine mountain roads will delight drivers who like a challenge.

ALPINE ROAD
Lindau, Germany to Bad Tölz, Germany – 300 miles

★ As you could guess from the title, the classic Alpine Road route takes the driver along the edge of the Bavarian Alps, passing small German towns and villages, each steeped in their own individual history. You'll pass Germany's highest peak as well as the wooden chalets and crystalline lakes Germany's countryside is famed for.

THE BASQUE CIRCUIT
Bilbao, Spain to Santurtzi, Spain – 300 miles

★ Spain's Basque Circuit starts at Bilbao port (accessible from Portsmouth, no less), and en route to Santurtzi you'll see imposing Spanish cathedrals, the unspoiled white sands of St. Sebastian and a slew of sleepy coastal fishing villages that'll make you think you've driven into *Final Fantasy VIII*'s Fisherman's Horizon.

★ THE SOUTHERN EUROPEAN SETTING OF *FORZA HORIZON 2* ALLOWS FOR SOME STUNNING ROAD TRIPS – IT'S GOT A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FLAVOUR TO THE COLORADO ROUTES OF ITS PREDECESSOR

★ WHILE THERE IS A LARGE ROSTER OF UNCONVENTIONAL CARS MAKING AN APPEARANCE IN *FORZA HORIZON 2*, SUPERCAR-LOVING PLAYERS ARE STILL GOING TO HAVE THEIR HORSEPOWER ITCHES SCRATCHED…



★ THE HORIZON FESTIVAL IS A FANTASTIC FRAMEWORK WHICH PLAYGROUND GAMES CAN OPERATE IN, ALLOWING FOR ALL MANNER OF COLOURFUL FLOURISHES AND ENGAGING AMBIANCE WHILE MAINTAINING REALISM

Forza Horizon 2, and they're all just about the fun of moving across fields and through vineyards."

★

THERE'S SOMETHING ANARCHIC ABOUT THE IDEA OF RACING A SUPERCAR THROUGH SOME POOR LANDOWNER'S VINEYARD THAT APPEALS TO US. The first game in the series is regarded by many as one of the best open-world driving games out there; critics praising the large game world, the realism, and the control granted to the player.

"[The game goes] back to the sense of fun of *Horizon*. Some people get hung-up on 'Oh, you can't take a Lamborghini through a vineyard [in real life].' No, of course you can't. There are laws that are very sensible that preclude that. But in our game it's crazy fun, and we really want the player to experience that." Fantasy scenarios like this are what encapsulate the whole open-world driving experience, and it's reassuring to see Playground Games expand on this mechanic – it could have been very easy for the team to take the game down a more serious route, in keeping with its *Forza* branding, but between the simulator-level customisation depth and the ability to do whatever you like in the vast stretches of open Europe, *Forza Horizon 2* promises an high level of complexity and immersion.

"DO WHAT YOU WANT IN THE ORDER THAT YOU WANT" RALPH FULTON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR

It's a credit to the team that it's been able to allow the player to drive up to (and occasionally over) 200mph in any given direction. The world has to get ready for the player; textures have to be loaded, landmarks located, scale mapped out. Fulton explains how it was one of Playground's most intense challenges when getting the game ready for its first playable demo:

"[Streaming the world] was the biggest technical hurdle our tech guys have had to solve. You think about a standard open world game, *Red Dead Redemption*, for example. That world needs to stream in at the pace of the fastest horse. In our game you can upgrade a [Bugatti] Veyron and it can do 270mph, we need to be streaming the game in at that pace. That's a technical problem our guys just eat up."

All of this graphical mastery is complemented by *Forza*'s trademark portmanteau 'Drivatar' technology, too – a system where you can train up a 'ghost' version of yourself to act as an AI opponent online, or in friends' games when you're not online. Say goodbye to NPCs – most drivers you'll encounter in *Horizon 2* will be the player-created mimics left over from *Forza 5*.

The inclusion and reliance on the 'Drivatar' has informed the game's design, then, with the single-player narrative taking a back seat while random player-trained AI take over as opponents in its stead. "While we were developing the game, we were actually able to bring down *Forza 5*'s Drivatars and just populate our world with them," illustrates Fulton. "Honestly, that day we flipped that switch, the game literally changed before our eyes. Just the way cars drove in our world changes – the way they drove in races in particular.

"Now, what you've never done in *Forza 5* is train your Drivatar to drive off the road – well, not intentionally anyway – but what you'll actually start doing from the day you start playing *Forza Horizon 2* is you will start training your Drivatar in where you'll take shortcuts, what parts of the world you visit, what trails and paths you like to take. You start to see that coming through as you start to see the Drivatars of other players within the game: you'll encounter them driving across fields, or driving out to find a barn, because that's what that player has done in the game. It's really cool."

This means that if you jump into a race as soon as you boot up *Horizon 2*, you're likely to lose. Not because you're a bad driver, or because the game is intentionally trying to cheat you, but because player-trained Drivatars will know how to cut routes here and there. To beat them, you'll have to follow their routes first, learning the roads before taking them on properly. It evokes a feeling similar to when we first started playing racing games, and had to watch other cars perfect the routes on the track before we really understood how to beat them. It promises to be challenging from the off – a refreshing change for open-world racers.



★ THE PROMISE OF RACING AGAINST THE EDUCATED AI OF YOUR FRIENDS INTRIGUES US. WE PLAN TO BE INTENTIONALLY AGGRESSIVE SO OUR GHOST RUNS THEM OFF THE ROAD...

"WE ARE REALLY ENCOURAGING YOU TO NOT JUST CREATE YOUR OWN STUFF, BUT TO SHARE IT WITH PEOPLE" RALPH FULTON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR

★

OF COURSE, IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE SENDING YOUR DRIVATAR OUT ONTO THE OPEN ROAD TO REPRESENT YOUR SKILLS IN YOUR ABSENCE, YOU'RE GOING TO WANT TO MAKE IT RECOGNISABLE. Customisation has always been a core facet of racing games, and Playground Games has been keen to remember this – especially considering this is a game that prides itself on having a large variety of cosmetic alterations *and* performance-adjusting options.

"Customisation and personalisation is a core part of the *Forza* franchise," states Fulton. "When we think about the things all *Forza* games must have that's one of them. [In *Horizon 2*], we have the Livery editor, which allows our community to create the most incredible creations. We have upgrades, too, which we had in the previous game. And what we are bringing back – which was one of the biggest things our fans asked for – is tuning. If you want to tune your ride heights, gear ratios and so on, we give you all that level of extra detail to tune your cars. You can swap those tuning set-ups and upgrade set-ups at car meets; you can swap your liveries at car meets; we are really encouraging you to not just create your own stuff and customise your own stuff, but to share it with other people, too."

Even the customisation is embracing the social aspect of modern games; it's not just racing and exploring that will make the most of your Xbox Live Friends List, but customisation and car-buying, too. We've already seen this social focus in the arcade-racing of *Need For Speed: Rivals*' 'Multi-Drive', we've already seen how Ubisoft plans to incorporate asynchronous multiplayer into *The Crew*. With a renewed focus on bringing players together in the virtual world of southern Europe – racing against each other and together, meeting atop the Alps to compare and swap tuning specs, training up the most flawless ghost drivers possible – it's clear *Forza Horizon 2* is aiming to retain its crown as the king of the open-world drivers, and really give Xbox owners something to brag about.

The Evolution of Racers

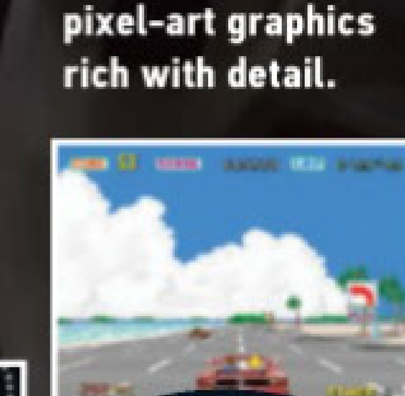
★ *Forza Horizon 2* looks stunning, but racing games haven't always been this close to cresting the uncanny valley: we chart the evolution of the genre, and its crawl to graphical splendour

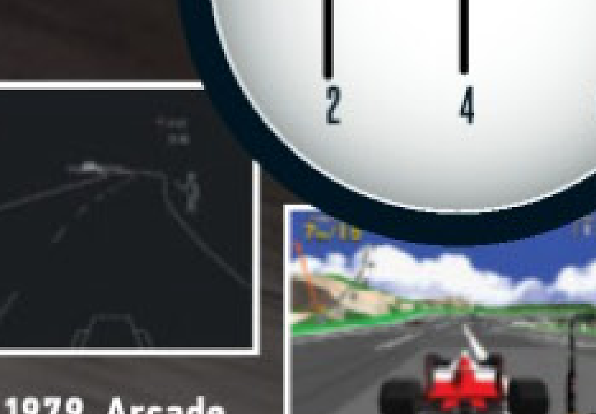
1 Atari began to slowly define the racing genre with its Arcade release of *Gran Track 10* in 1974 – the first racing game to come with its own steering wheel.



2 In 1979, Arcade cabinet game Speed Freak brings vector graphics to the genre, giving virtual racers their first taste of in-game 3D.

3 *OutRun* reached international fame when Sega releases it in arcades in 1986 – its pixel-art graphics rich with detail.

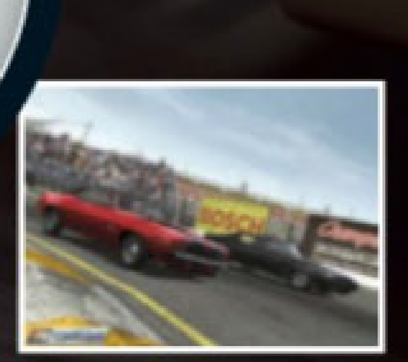




4 Formula One game *Virtua Racing* hit the arcades in 1992, courtesy of Sega, taking the genre fully down the 3D route.



5 Also in 1992, we saw a whole new branch of racers emerge with *Super Mario Kart* on the SNES, taking the genre in a more cartoony, casual direction.



6 When the original *Forza* came out on the Xbox in 2005, it captured a level of reality and flourish that competitors like *Gran Turismo* couldn't.



Inside Guerrilla Games



PROPRIETORS OF THE KILLZONE FRANCHISE, GUERRILLA GAMES HAS ALWAYS MATCHED BIG IDEAS WITH EVEN BIGGER AMBITION. NOW, AFTER HELPING LAUNCH THE PLAYSTATION 4 WITH KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL AND DEEP IN DEVELOPMENT ON A NEW IP, GUERRILLA INVITES GAMES™ TO ITS HEADQUARTERS IN AMSTERDAM FOR A LOOK BEHIND ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST TALENTED STUDIOS

Much like the old maxim that you should never judge a book by its cover, the same can easily be applied to the outward appearance of any videogame developer. Valve's Seattle-based headquarters is wedged several floors above ground in the type of beige nondescript office tower that should have its walls adorned in cat-based motivational posters, not concepts for best-selling science-fiction games; likewise, 4A Games' technical excellence is somewhat belied by its location in the heart of Kiev in a low-key outfit adjacent to a car garage and surrounded by stray animals.

On the other end of the scale is Guerrilla Games. Located among the narrow canals of Amsterdam and in one of the classier areas of the city, its chalk-white walls proudly display its company's logo, through its sliding doors is a reception area dressed up in replica explosive barrels, camouflage netting and overseen by a Helghast soldier. And the charade continues through its corridors and into its main social area, before taking a more customary approach to interior office design upstairs – but even here trophies and awards are proudly displayed in a cabinet for visitors to glance at as they enter. But, weirdly, modesty is what rises to the surface during our time at the studio.

"Everyone shares that drive to go after the next big thing and that's probably the overriding attitude when stepping through these doors," says Guerrilla's Steven ter Heide, game director on *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, who, alongside lead designer Arjan Bak, is spending his time today guiding us around the studio's digs. "It's a very ambitious and passionate studio. You need to be. You're living with these games for years and you really need to like games to make them."

That enthusiasm has earned Guerrilla a sterling reputation among critics and consumers alike, matching technical excellence and immersive gameplay consistently with some of the best visuals on the market. It's this obsessive attention to detail that, as ter Heide says, keeps the studio ticking over on a daily basis. "Everyone will be passionate talking about the one little thing that they're working on," he beams. "'This is the best lamppost ever!' one person will say. You have to rein in a little bit. 'That lamppost is not the most important thing in the game. You might want to focus on it for another week but that's probably not a good idea.'"

"At one point we had the highest resolution ashtray ever made," adds Bak as an example from the studio's most recent release, *Killzone: Shadow Fall*. "It had the latest lighting model and texture resolutions were through the roof. It took up a sizeable portion of the memory alone. It's just a tiny thing… but that's how passionate people get working here." Primarily known as the *Killzone* studio (Guerrilla made multiplatform title *Shellshock: Nam '67* before moving onto *Killzone* and signing and being acquired by Sony), it has worked on every home console entry in the franchise since it arrived on PS2 in 2002. Its most recent challenge was its most daunting: delivering the PlayStation 4's biggest launch title, back in late 2013.

"It was the right choice to do it," exclaims ter Heide with a hint of regret. "If we had to go back and had to say 'Would you do a launch title again?' Yes, I would make that decision again. It was good for us as a team in terms of getting used to new hardware, to focus the entire company on doing something new. It felt very liberating and inspiring. You run into new boundaries but I think that's very exciting because creatively you can do a lot of things. *But* at the same time you know that deadline is there; you're committed to launch and that is always something that's in the back of your head, and all the changes you make are in light of that."

"IF WE HAD TO GO BACK AND HAD TO SAY 'WOULD YOU DO A LAUNCH TITLE AGAIN?' YES, I WOULD MAKE THAT DECISION AGAIN"
STEVEN TER HEIDE, GAME DIRECTOR

Ter Heide muses on changes that could've been made to the game, talking about the sizeable task the studio had and how on a gameplay level the studio's focus became blurred as development continued. Praising his team's work on the expansive opening level, he expresses slight disappointment that the studio didn't do better in following missions that regressed into more linear gameplay tropes.

"Could we have made different choices? Would it have resulted in a different type of game? Absolutely. But would it have been a better or worse »

■ PROVIDING THE PLAYSTATION 4 WITH ITS KILLER APP ON LAUNCH WAS ONE OF THE HARDEST CHALLENGES THE STUDIO HAS EVER HAD TO FACE.



■ Game director Steven ter Heide describes much of the team as quite blunt. "People will just say 'That's shit.' We're open and honest about what we think it should be and never afraid to learn or ask questions."

» game? I don't know. We try at the time to make the best choices we can. Looking back at the game, certainly there are things we could've done better. We may have been too ambitious – it's the biggest game we've built ever in terms of content. Way more variety in terms of environments, it's a huge campaign and it's a little bit too much perhaps. We could've been more diligent in picking the things we wanted. But you just roll with it. You're on a train that you can't stop."

However, *Shadow Fall* was far from a negative experience. As one of the first of Sony's worldwide teams to get hands-on with the hardware, discovering and utilising the potential of the PlayStation 4 was a hugely gratifying experience. "One thing the PS4 helped with – and we've been there for every generation from PS2 – is that it was easy to adapt," reveals Bak. "There was very little time to get into it and get our game running, but there were more straightforward toolsets to work with. The PS3 was more abstract in terms of getting the most of it, and we got good at it by the time we got to *Killzone 3*, but with PS4 it has all that power there and you can start using it quickly."

Held in equally high esteem with studios such as Epic and Crytek when it comes to bleeding-edge visuals, one of the biggest challenges for being one of the first titles out on a new generation of hardware was defining exactly what the rest of the generation would deliver to gamers. Ter Heide muses on both what the studio achieved with *Shadow Fall* and where computer graphics are heading in the next few years. "I think graphics and tech aren't worth as much as having to make gameplay to accompany it," he says. "We have ambitions and we look at PS4 – going from 3 to 4 – what's going to define this generation in terms of tech features and look. It's difficult to nail down a single feature. It's trying to come up with a consistent living world that you feel is alive. That's something we circled with *Shadow Fall*. We'd have trees and leaves that moved realistically but as soon as one thing didn't have the physical properties you expect from the real world, the whole image would collapse. Everything needs to be at a certain level – whether it's the wind passing through or accurate reflections – and that's the trickiest thing to get right. That takes more than good tech; that takes clever art and game direction to come together into a coherent image. For a lot of people in the studio who have been living in the franchise for ten to fifteen years, now is very exciting time," enthuses ter Heide. "It's hard also because this is an entirely different challenge of starting something new and fresh." Hitting an abrupt impasse on our tour, we're confronted by a series of doors blacked out by large curtains obstructing the view into the main work areas of the team. "There's a new IP in development here, which is why all these things are dark," confirms ter Heide. " There are other things happening in the studio that are being worked on alongside *Killzone*."

■ The latest batch of DLC for *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is the co-op expansion *Intercept*.

Guerrilla won't divulge any new details about its unannounced new project, other than it's completely different to *Killzone* and will arrive on PlayStation 4. Having worked on the *Killzone* franchise for over a decade, the new IP represents a fresh creative opportunity for the studio. "We've spent a lot of time with one franchise and we know it inside out and know what the fan's expectations are," says ter Heide. "But at the same time every game has a different challenge to it. With *Killzone 2* we set ourselves a ridiculous benchmark with a certain trailer and trying to live up to that; with *Killzone 3* we integrated Move, we integrated 3D, we had a very short dev cycle; in *Shadow Fall* it was a launch title, so that was new for us. Every project is different with creative challenges – it helped the team to break new ground and go beyond their boundaries."

So with each project representing a new challenge for the studio as it continues to expand both creatively and as

Guerrilla on Project Morpheus

With Project Morpheus attracting a lot of industry buzz, there's much speculation about which of Sony's internal studios will be integrating the new device into their next projects. After successfully making Move and 3D a part of *Killzone 3*, has Guerrilla Games thought about integrating Morpheus? "I think Morpheus is a really exciting proposition," says game director Steve ter Heide. "It's a different way of experiencing games. There are a lot of experiences there and a lot of games that bring to life its value but I'm not sure an FPS is right for it just yet. I'm not sure if the control methods perhaps need a little more work? I don't know yet; I've not had enough time to sit with it and figure it out. But I think it holds great promise. We haven't had enough time with it to know whether we can make it work for the types of games we want to make."

a prominent European developer, what challenge does the new IP represent? "I would say the big challenge is doing two projects," says Bak. Ter Heide agrees: "Becoming a multi-project studio is a challenge in itself. We're finding that it's not two projects you're running, because if you have post-launch as well it'll become three projects. You have to be sensitive to the needs of other projects and it's a different ball game altogether."

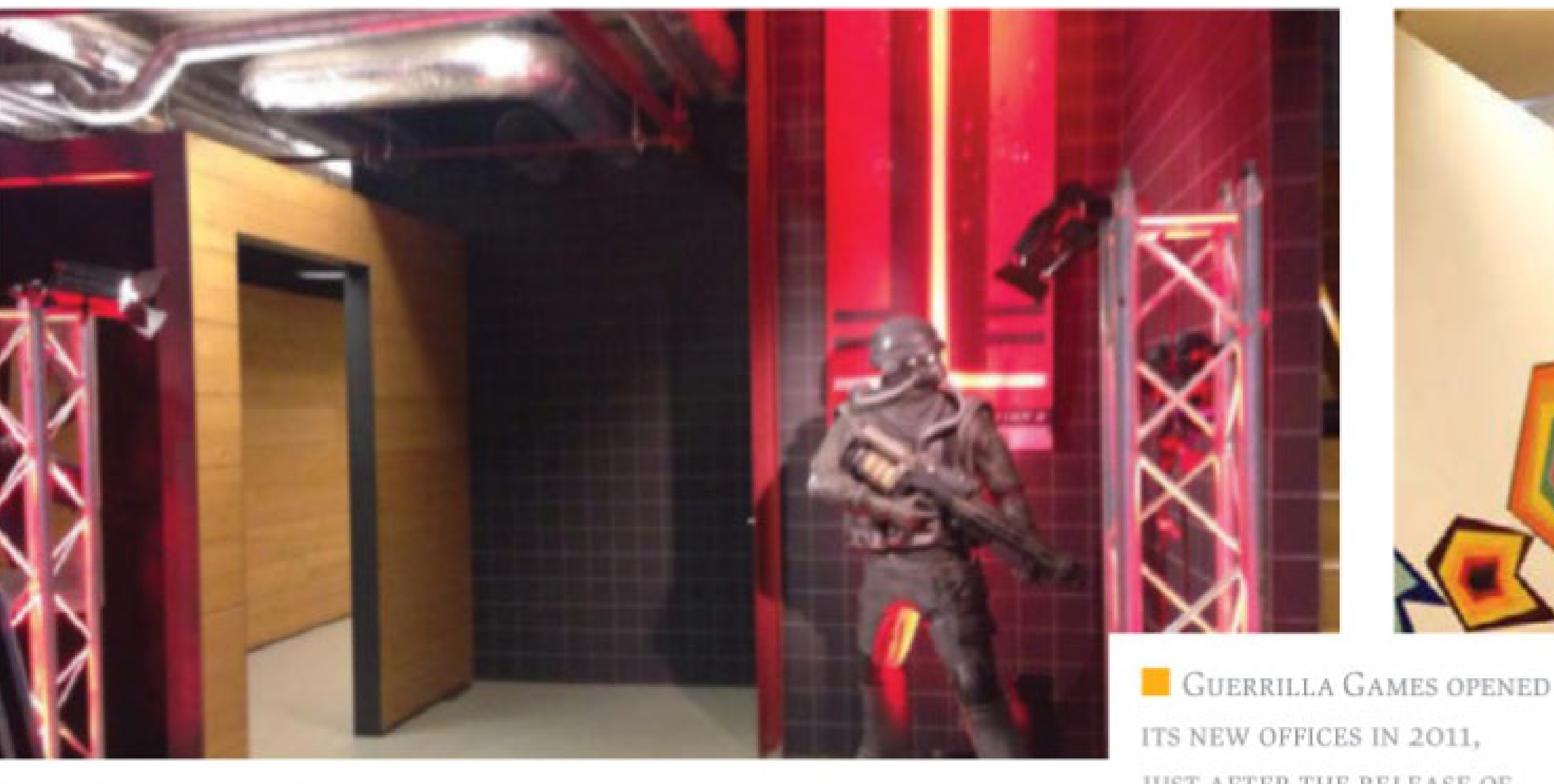
Bak and ter Heide talk about post-launch support and investment in the community to continue to develop and evolve a game months after its release. *Shadow Fall* most recently launched its *Intercept* DLC – a co-op multiplayer add-on that shakes up the fundamental gameplay. "We see it that the game is the players. It's not ours," says ter Heide. "We've told an interesting story and made the game we wanted to make, put a whole bunch of features in there but players will gravitate to areas that they like. We're there to then support it. If we look at how people are playing multiplayer right now – for example, we didn't set up the game to be about Team Deathmatch, we really wanted it to be more tactical and objective-based. Yet, Team Deathmatch is the most popular mode being played online right now in *Killzone*. Who are we to say that's wrong? People are having fun and they're entitled to that, so how can we make that a better experience? There are limits to what you can do and how much you can change the game but within reason we'll try to adapt and adjust. It's their game now and we'll see how far we can support that."

It's an encouraging thought and one driven both by the studio's passion for its own games but also for the people that play them. As Guerrilla moves into uncharted territory by breaking away from the beloved IP it has cultivated over the past decade, there's a focus here on learning and openness that creates a unique mindset among its peers.

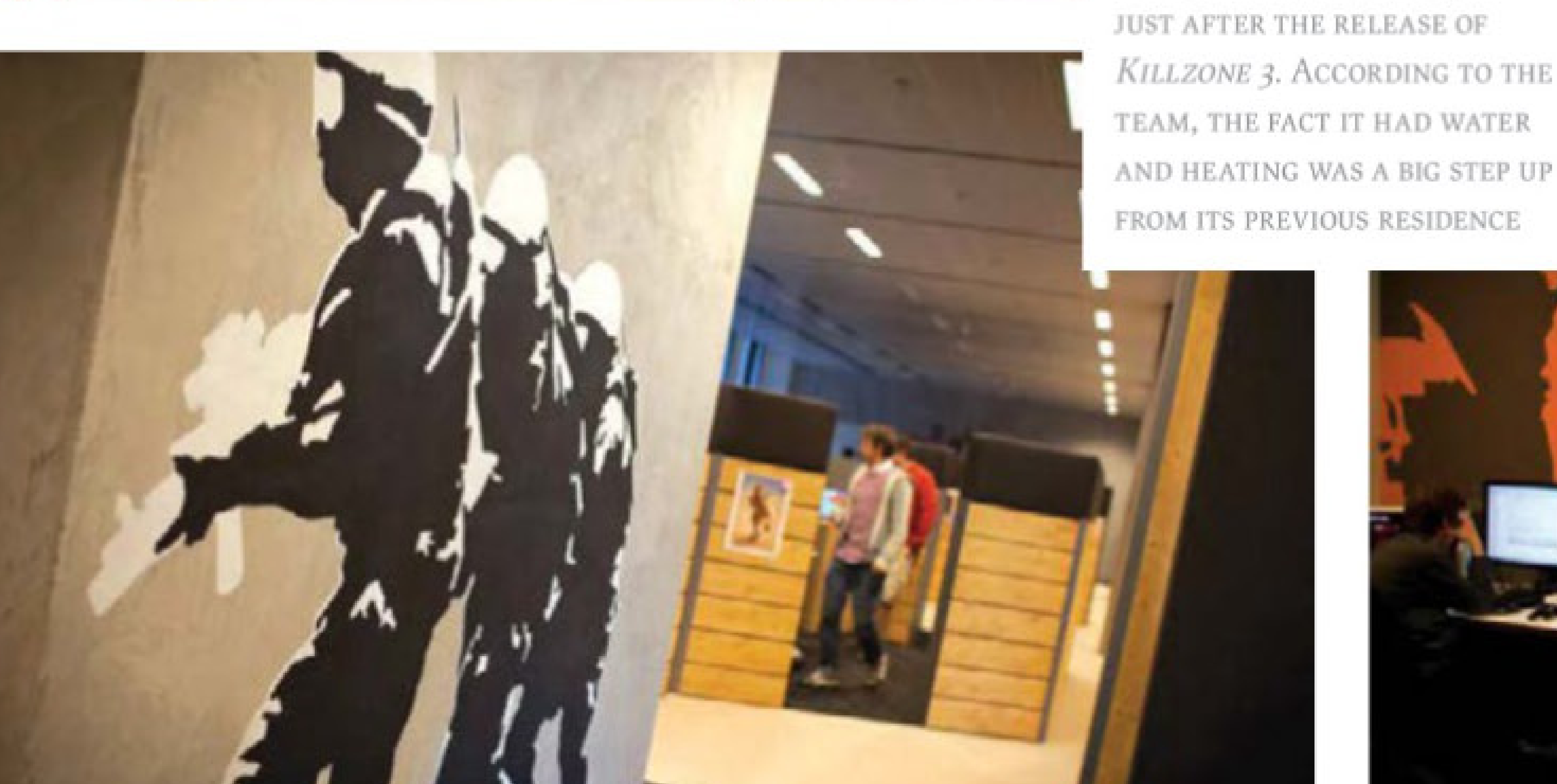
"We're very ambitious and driven – you need to be if you want to be in the industry," states ter Heide, matter-of-factly. " But for us it's more towards ourselves than the outside. Ever since *Killzone,* people have been saying that we're the *Halo*-killers. We're not the *Halo*-killer, we're just making a shooter that happens to launch around the same window as *Halo. Killzone 2* was compared to all of these military shooters like *Call Of Duty.* We've not sought that out; we've made the games we wanted to make and do the best we can. It's awesome because we feel we're still a young studio with a lot to learn still – yet we're being compared to *Call Of Duty* with these humongous studios behind them that have track records that go way, way back. We're not there yet; we're not even in the same league."

> "We know that we can do better and we need to do better and that's what drives us"
> Steven ter Heide, game director

"We've just moved to a studio with power and facilities," laughs Bak, pointing out our impressively lavish surroundings. "You should've seen our old building." Even if the studio looks the part, for everyone inside Guerrilla there's still plenty left to prove. "That's what's exciting is that we can see there's so much more ladder to climb," concludes ter Heide. "We know that we can do better and we need to do better and that's what drives us. That's the internal drive of knowing we can absolutely get there."









Guerrilla Games opened its new offices in 2011, just after the release of *Killzone 3*. According to the team, the fact it had water and heating was a big step up from its previous residence

BEFORE THEY WERE FAMOUS

Kerning needs adjusting

29°

tighten up

line not entirely straight

push up slightly

30.2 mm

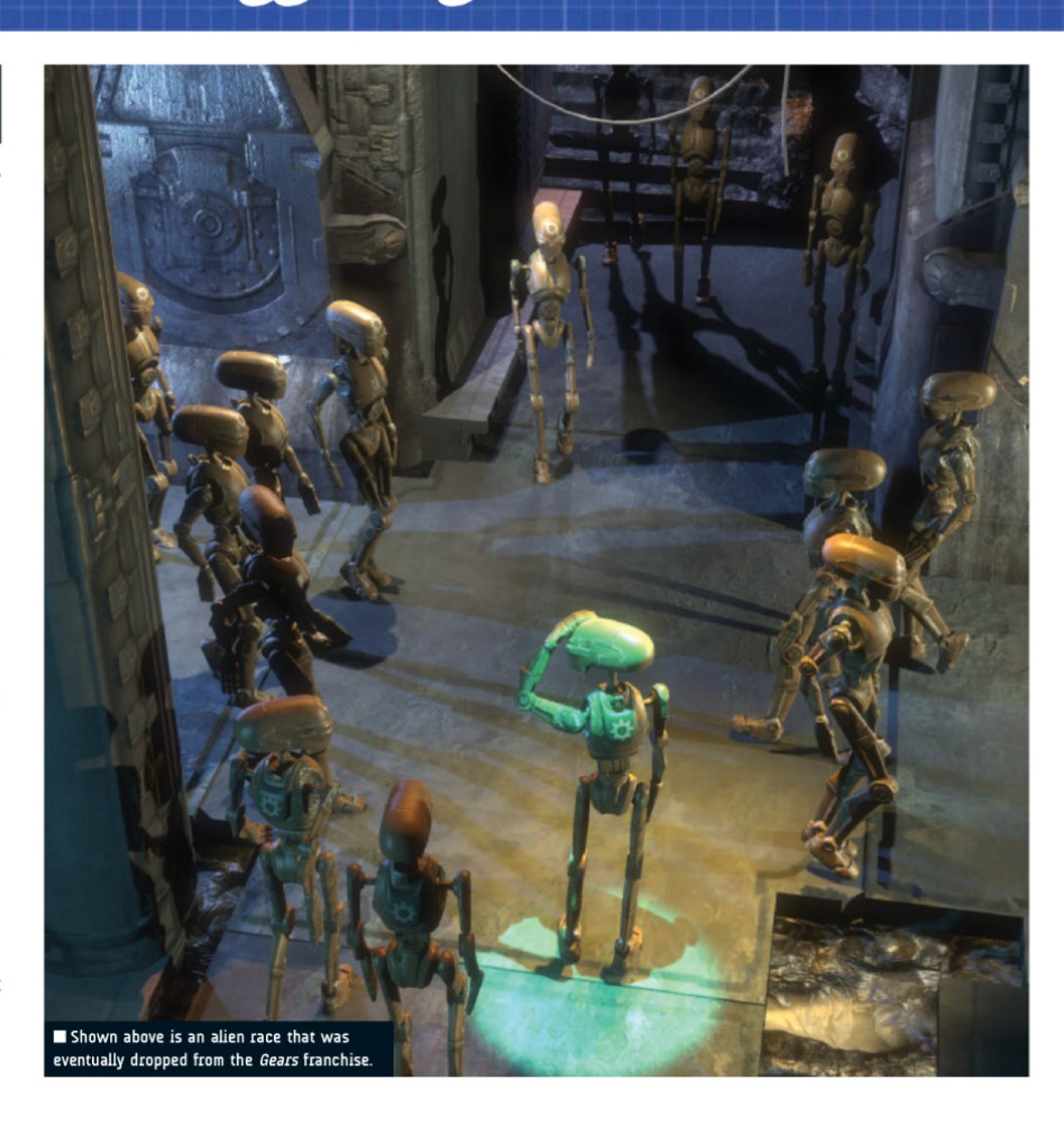
Developers discuss the unseen original concepts behind some of the biggest games of all time

GEARS OF WAR

***Gears Of War* wasn't always the testosterone-fuelled, machismo third-person shooter that came to define the early life of the Xbox 360; it actually rose from the ashes of an unfinished Unreal game that had been in the works five years before *Gears* would see the light of day.** "*Gears* started as a class-based *Battlefield* kind-of game," explains Unreal Engine lead programmer James Golding, "It had classes, mechs and it was going to be multiplayer-focused... that was until [Cliff Bleszinski] played *Medal Of Honor* and he was like 'No, single-player campaign is where it's at!'"

The early 2000s were an intensely busy time for Epic – after Unreal Tournament shipped, Epic began looking at releasing some new IP, to showcase the power of the Unreal Engine 2. "So we were working on this multiplayer-focused class-based game, which I think started off being called *Unreal Warfare*, and the idea was that you could play it in a big multiplayer arena or against bots, and we came up with this mech that you could deploy and use to suppress the battlefield," explains Golding. "Because we'd been working on *Unreal Tournament 3* before that (and then Unreal Tournament 2003 and 2004) by the time we came back to look at *Unreal Warfare*, it'd been a couple of years and the industry had completely changed.

"We saw the rise of more single-player and campaign-based games, so we took *Unreal Warfare* back to the drawing board – it became just 'Warfare', got another name, then *another* name (but we always kept the 'War' part – that stayed!). We redid a whole bunch of the characters at this point, too: we went from the



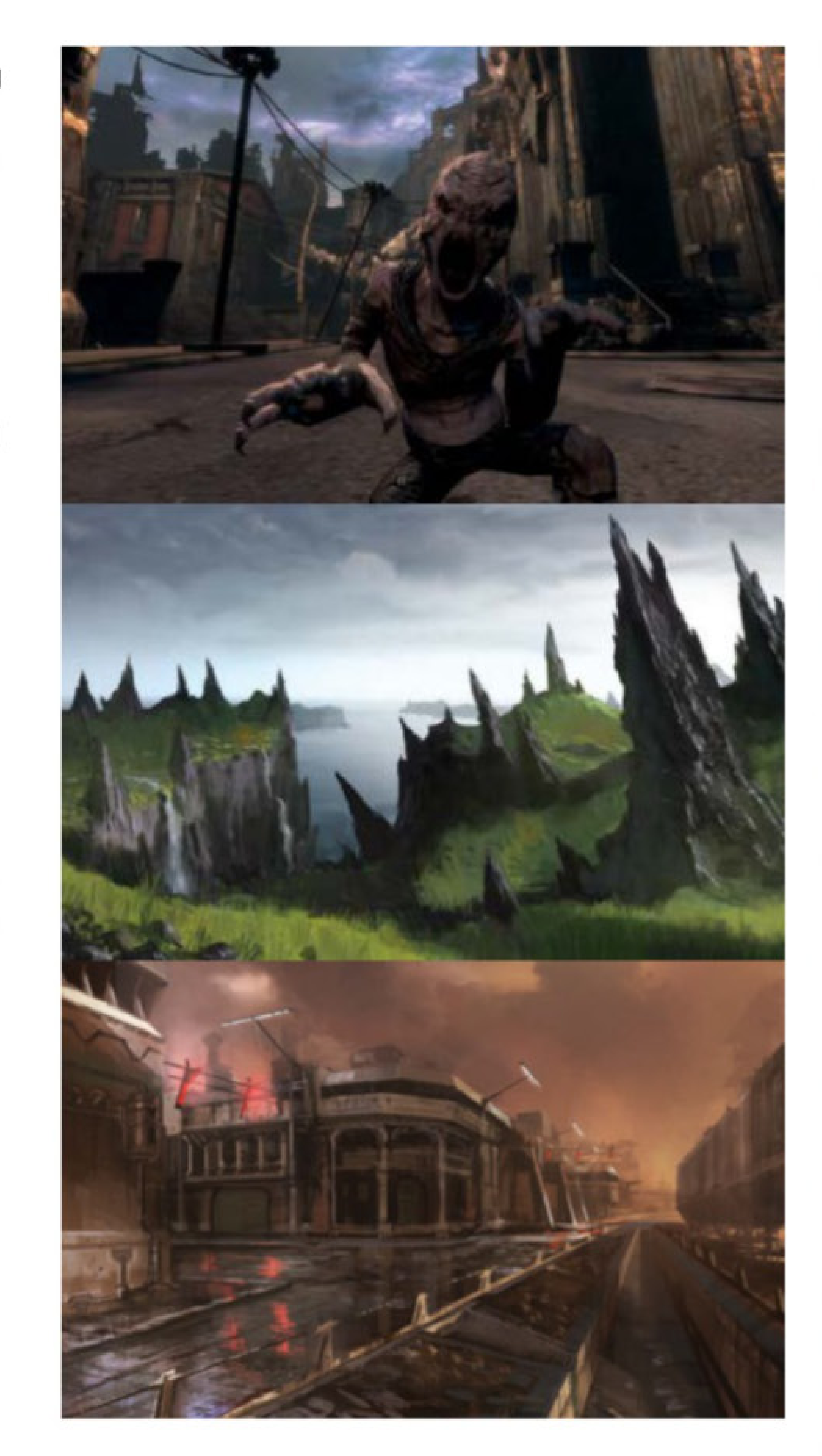
■ Shown above is an alien race that was eventually dropped from the *Gears* franchise.

traditional-looking soldiers to a more sci-fi looking thing and certain precepts like 'no laser guns' came along a little bit later, and it slowly became more in line with the *Gears Of War* we know now."

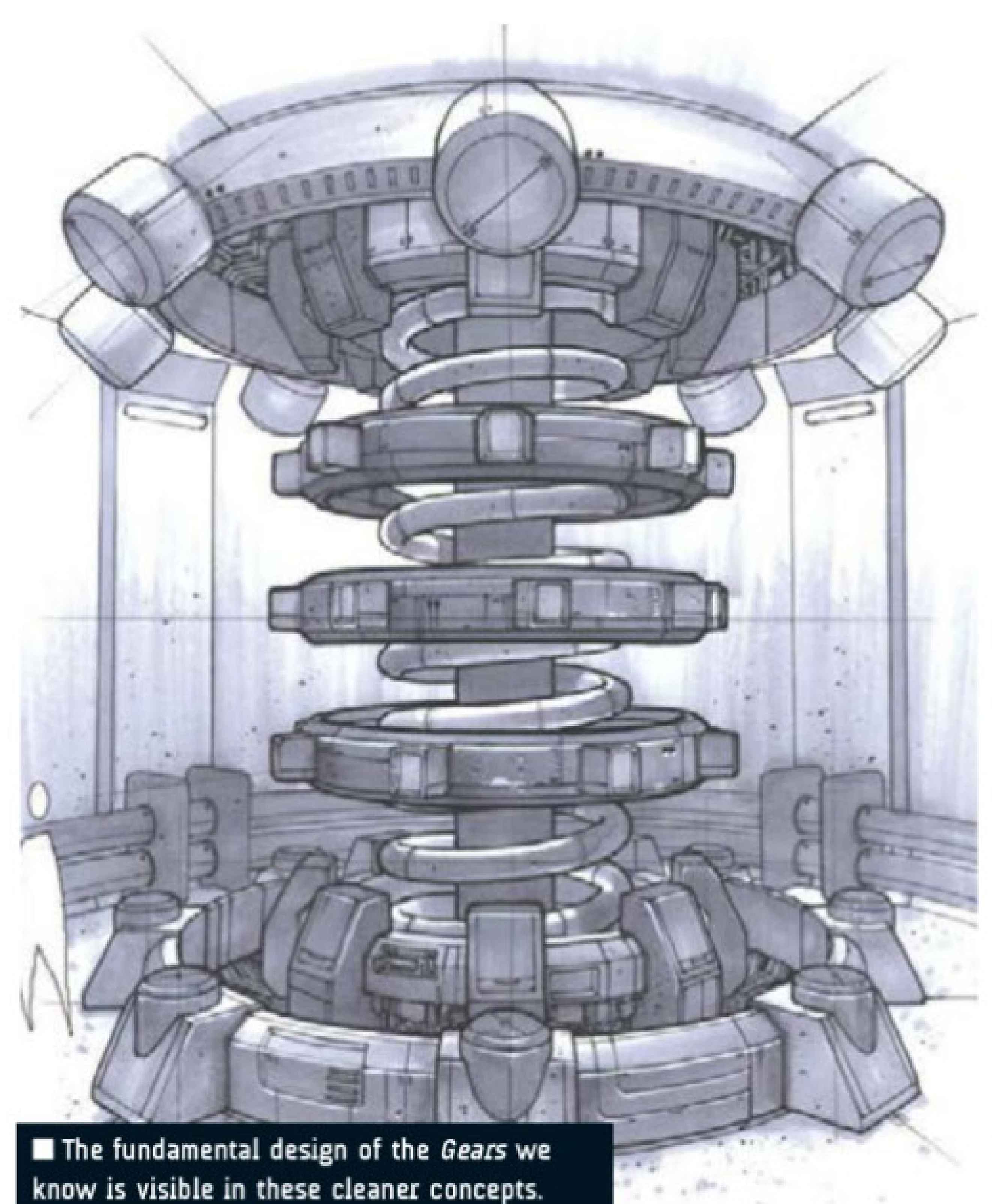
Epic showed off *Warfare* at GDC 2002, featuring a demo where an industrial sci-fi planet hosted a group of four soldiers (reminiscent of our old COG friends) exploring catacombs and cave networks… that looked remarkably similar to Locust burrows. The game was to be a vehicle-based shooter with on-foot sections, and the enemies the player would be facing would be called the 'Geist' (see right).

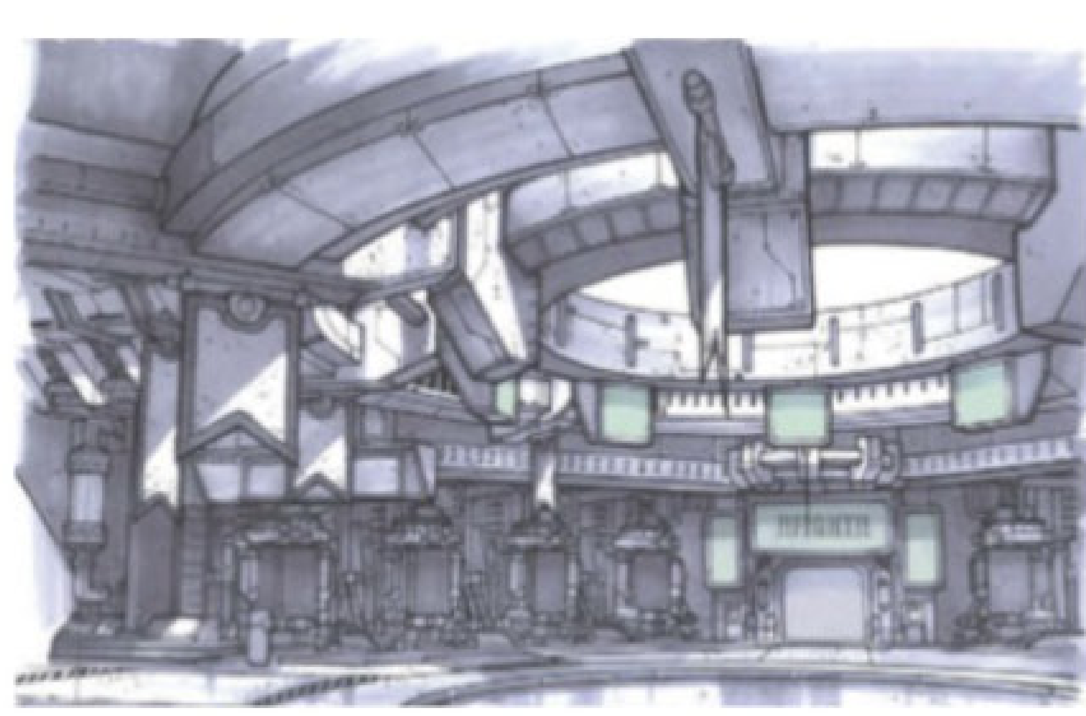
By the time *Warfare* came to be redesigned into *Gears Of War*, there were years' worth of assets floating around the Epic studio, which were studied by newcomer Jerry O'Flaherty when he arrived at Epic to become *Gears Of War*'s art director. "The early concept for *Gears* kept the class-based assets, but just altered the art style a little – the evolution of the game really was a slow, organic process," Golding elaborates. "We were lucky, because we were fairly independent, having the [Unreal Engine] business – we weren't on a deadline from a publisher or anything. The project just came up and down and meandered for a long time before it all became assigned to *Gears Of War*.

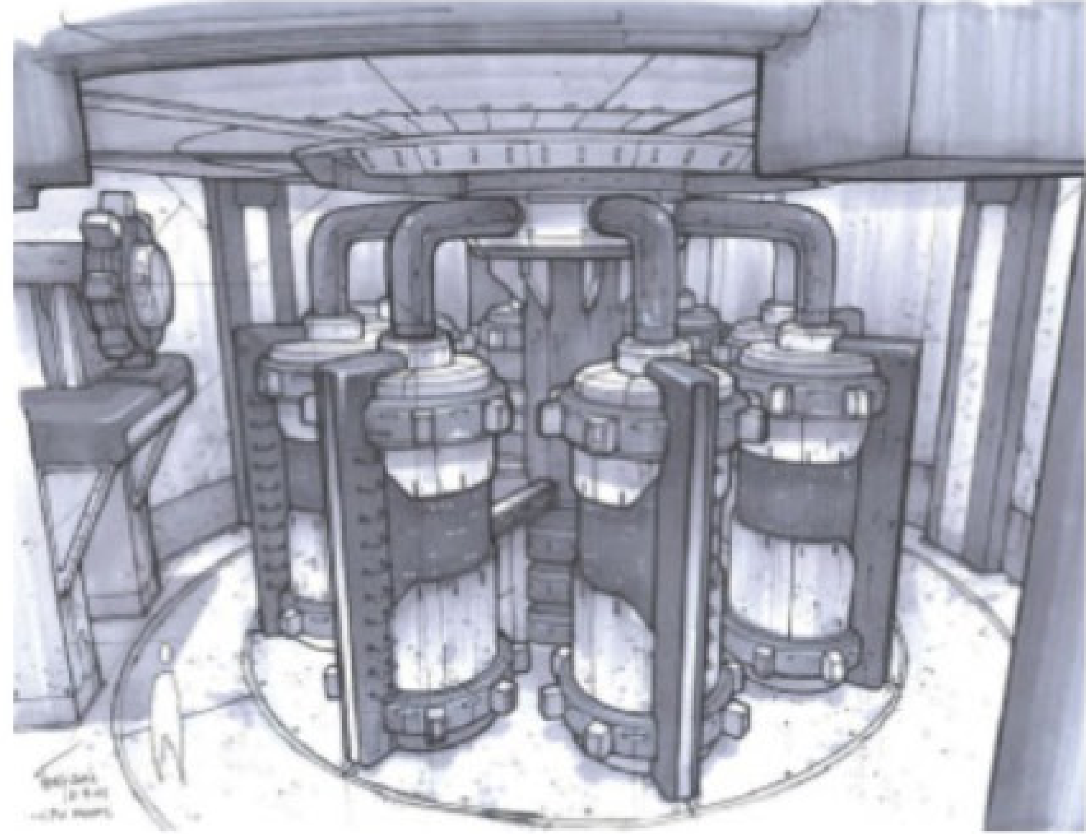
"The team at Unreal was working on the first draft of the game in 2001, as a multiplayer game, and *Gears* shipped in 2006 – so it took five years for the whole project to become this very different, whole other thing. Back in 2006, there was a real crunch to get the game done, a month before release. That was the first game on the Unreal 3 engine, and it had a lot of new ideas, a lot of new tech, and the lead-up to release was the busiest I've ever been at Epic."



"Gears shipped in 2006 – so it took five years for the whole project to become this very different whole other thing"







■ The fundamental design of the *Gears* we know is visible in these cleaner concepts.



HALO

Bungie's breakthrough series put Microsoft on the map when it released on the original Xbox in 2001. But two years before its release, *Halo* was a completely different beast. Originally pitched to Apple and Microsoft, *Halo* was conceived as a real-time strategy game with third-person shooter elements – "basically *Myth* in a sci-fi universe" Bungie once claimed. Once Microsoft acquired Bungie and pushed the studio into making a game for its new console, the developer changed tack. *Halo* programmer Jason Jones cites the move to the Xbox platform as a boost of inspiration: ""It's really fun to know that everyone who's playing your game is going to be having the same experience," he revealed on the Bungie blog. "You know they're going to be sitting in a comfortable place with the controller you expect them to have."

BORDERLANDS

Borderlands' distinctive art style hasn't always been so distinctive. In fact, it wasn't until fairly late into the development process that Gearbox decided to radically alter the art direction and make everything that little bit more cartoonified and stylised, injecting a vibrancy to the game. Rumour has it the inspiration for the change came from a short film called *Codehunters*, which showcased the non-cel-shaded cartoon graphics that Gearbox wanted to use.



This guy looks kinda samey, maybe we should make it all cartoony?

SLEEPING DOGS

Sleeping Dogs had a difficult and protracted development cycle, and was passed back and forth between publishers repeatedly before it saw a release. Conceived as 'Black Lotus', the game was going to feature an original character modelled on Lucy Liu, but Activision didn't want to bankroll new IP with a female protagonist, so rebranded it *True Crime: Hong Kong* and swapped in a male lead. Activision cancelled the project in 2011, stating "only top-tier games can be competitive in today's market". Eventually, Square Enix bought the game, rebranded it *Sleeping Dogs*, and – finally – released it.

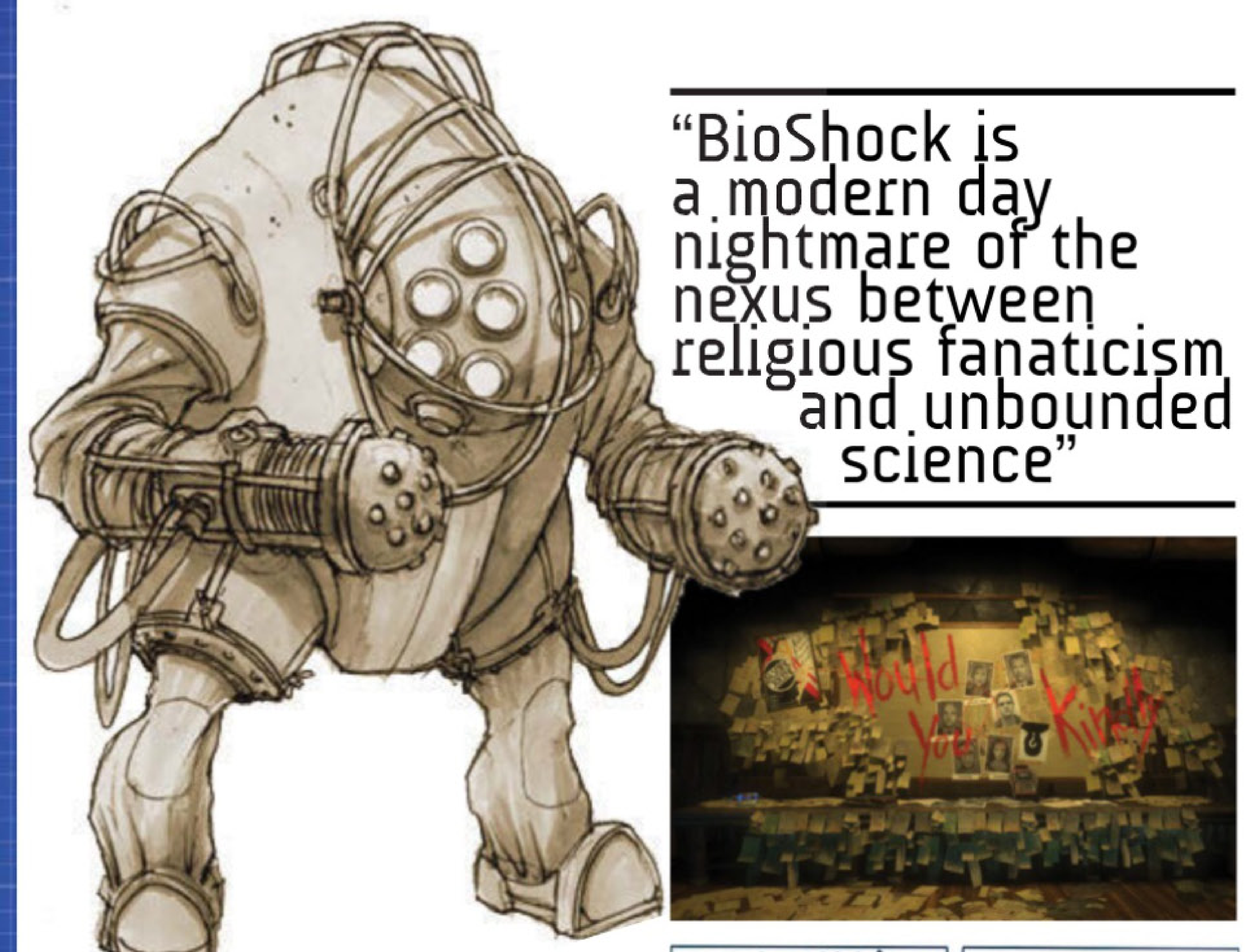


GTA

It's bizarre to think that this blockbuster franchise had such humble beginnings, far removed from the anarchic sandbox that would eventually come to be known as *Grand Theft Auto*. Originally under development as 'Race'N'Chase', the game was pitched as a "fun, addictive and fast multiplayer car racing and crashing game which uses a novel graphics method".

"We envisioned a straight cops-and-robbers driving game," recalls writer Brian Baglow, "but it went from that to a car-based crime sim and wild sandbox adventure. We initially had the player as a good guy, and it was a long way down the line before the decision to try playing as a criminal was made. At that point, we could see something was in there. Something fun and unique."





"BioShock is a modern day nightmare of the nexus between religious fanaticism and unbounded science"

BIOSHOCK

The original *BioShock* was supposed to see a release on the Xbox, and a tech demo showing off what the game was to become was released in 2002, looking almost completely different to the eventual game that would come to settle on the Xbox 360 and PS3. The narrative was initially more focused on Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* than *BioShock*'s final influence, the Ayn Rand epic *Atlas Shrugged* – it was effectively a spiritual successor to *System Shock 2*.

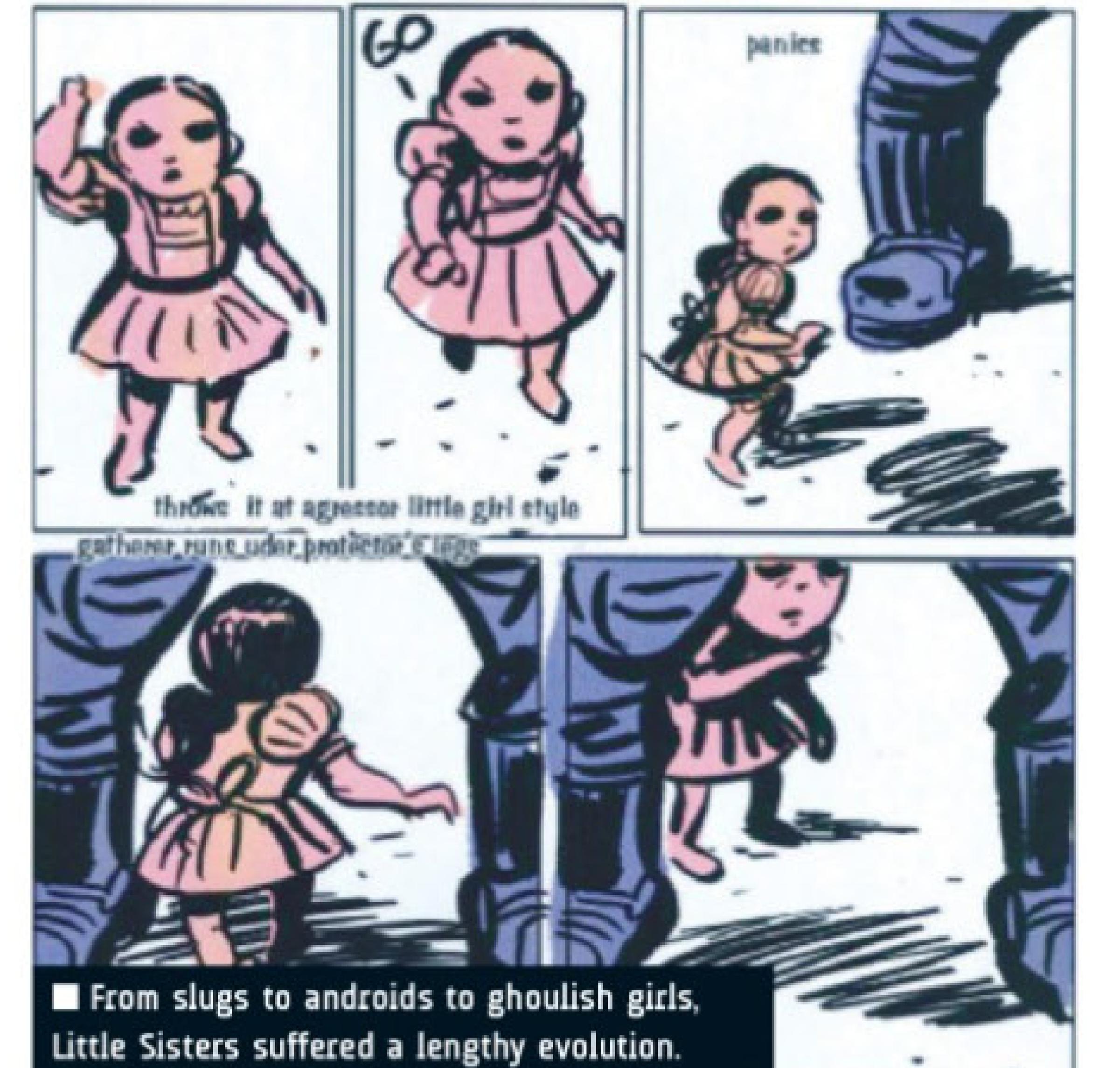
"*BioShock* is a modern day nightmare of the terrifying nexus between religious fanaticism and unbounded science," reads the overview in the game's original pitch document. "The player must come to grips with the remnants of a dangerous cult and the technological and biological horrors they've created in their giant underground and undersea complex that lies beneath the sands of a seemingly deserted island." The concept art supporting Levine's original vision of *BioShock* shows how these mutated beings eventually came to be the Splicers that broke up the game's enemy AI ecosystem so well – though the cannon-fodder in the final game was much more human than the aquatic mutant drones pictured here.

Little Sisters were originally designed bizarrely as slug-like beings protected by a hardened layer of armour, who you'd still have to hunt and kill, but the idea to have them protected by Big Daddies was a long way off (and a few revisions before release, Big Daddies were still wholly different entities that were wheelchair-bound, rather than diving suit-clad). According to the design document presented by Irrational Games pre-development, BioShock was always conceived as a "first-person shooter plus, not an RPG with shooter elements". So that much didn't change, but pretty much everything else did: the document goes on to outline the game's thematic content, where the player would take control of Carlos Cuello, a 'cult deprogrammer' – a shady operative that would kidnap a person and alter their mind.

As the enigmatic Cuello (who was "a very dark character," according to the game's director and creator, Ken Levine) you would be able to "increase/decrease oxygen content", "magnetize the floor", "ionize the air", "manipulate gravitational fields", "electrify the floor" and "manipulate temperature" – all of which combined to give the impression of an incredibly ambitious product, and one that laid the foundations for the oppressive underwater dystopia Rapture would eventually manifest itself as.







■ From slugs to androids to ghoulish girls, Little Sisters suffered a lengthy evolution.

UNCHARTED

One of gaming's most recent icons wasn't always the intrepid explorer we've always known him as, and the world he operated in wasn't always the grounded Earth that we got to know intimately in the first *Uncharted*…

"*Uncharted* evolved a lot from inception down to the final months," Don Poole, ex-environment modeller at Naughty Dog tells us. "The character design of Nathan Drake took a lot of twists and turns, for example – the initial design was more of a goofy, younger guy. We joked that he looked like one of those bozos you'd see on a bad reality TV show! But he was, over time, moulded into this older, smarter guy.

"Also, lots of gameplay cuts mechanics were tried out and ultimately cut due to time and limited resources. We originally planned on levels requiring swimming using the Sixaxis control but due to the demands of the schedule, it had to be cut. The initial ideas for the game were nothing like what we ended up with: the small team tasked with brainstorming the game was really going in a more fantasy, mythic direction. The characters were going to be a lot more 'fantastic' and the environments more organic." But it apparently wasn't enough just to tone it down.

"Sony kept pushing for a game that was more realistic in all aspects," Poole continues. "The market had changed a lot by then, the demographic was older and gritty shooters were really dominating. Sony wanted to get into that market share, and pushed all its developers in that direction to appeal to the older demographic that had evolved over the course of the PlayStation 2.

"Most of the old [Naughty Dog] employees were from the *Crash Bandicoot* and *Jak* era and preferred that whimsical style, but I enjoyed the challenge of making something more realistic. What made *Uncharted* start to evolve was that Amy Hennig and the folks developing the theme and story really wanted to ensure we had a strong Saturday matinee, old-school movie vibe. The story and the game universe all found its footing with that direction and it became much easier to put it together once we all got that big picture in mind."

■ The fantasy-inspired origins of *Uncharted* can still be seen in the locales Drake visits.

ZOMBI U

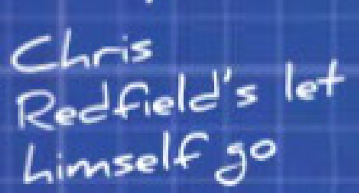
'Killer Freaks from Outer Space' was originally pitched by Ubisoft Montpellier as a game where you kill the *Rayman* series' (in)famous rabbids. It was going to be human survivors versus Rabbid aliens – a departure from the previously family-friendly direction of the Rabbids. The game got very little attention when it was announced, unfortunately, so Ubisoft removed the titular 'killer freaks' and made the whole game a bit more serious, and the title eventually re-emerged as *Zombi U* – presumably because zombies sell – a much more realistic first-person survival horror with character permadeath.



DEVIL MAY CRY

Dante wasn't originally going to be the stylish character that came slicing and dicing his way onto our screens in 2001. That honour was going to fall to a hero named Tony, the protagonist of the game's original guise as *Resident Evil 4*. Hideki Kamiya, who had previously worked on the original *Resident Evil*, was asked by master of horror Shinji Mikami to add another entry to the *Resi* franchise, and after taking a lengthy trip to Europe to study all the gothic architecture that would inspire the game Mikami came to feel the game strayed too far from the traditional survival-horror roots of the *Resi* series. Undeterred, the director Kamiya rewrote the scenario for the game to fit more with the 'cool' style the title was striving for. Thus, *Devil May Cry* and the mouthy Dante were born.





DOOM



Doom was conceived as an *Aliens* game, oddly enough, but a little way into development John Carmack and designer Tom Hall decided the game was better suited to a self-created mythos that could be expanded on. Hall created the 'Doom Bible', an elaborate pitch document that outlined a game that would feature an in-depth storyline, multiple player characters, and a slew of interactive environmental features. The majority of this vision was stripped back by Carmack, however, who was gunning for a more simplistic, minimalist game experience. Hall left the project during development, his ideas more and more diluted, and the game slowly shifted into the *Doom* that came to define the genre.

STARFOX ADVENTURES



After achieving the honour of being one of the only Western developers allowed to work with Nintendo property, Rare became inspired, and started working on a new IP – *Dinosaur Planet*, the main character of which was a chirpy fox that would quest around a fantasy planet helping other non-human characters. Sounds familiar, right? Miyamoto saw Rare's fox looked like his Starfox, and suggested collaboration with the studio, leading to the creation of *Starfox Adventures*.

"It was definitely a convoluted route to publishing Banjo-Kazooie"

BANJO-KAZOOIE

Rare's seminal family-friendly platform adventure propelled the studio to worldwide acclaim, yet the studio's first *Banjo-Kazooie* game didn't even feature the titular protagonist to begin with. *Banjo-Kazooie* entered the world as *Project Dream* – intended to be a SNES RPG with pre-rendered backgrounds, taking the player on a journey over the high seas of a fantastical world.

"It was definitely a very convoluted route [to publishing the game]!" says Rare's creative director Gregg Mayles. "Contrary to what many people would like to think, we didn't just have a flash of inspiration one day and say 'Right! We are going to make a humorous 3D platform adventure game featuring an affable bear in tight yellow shorts carrying a mouthy bird in a blue backpack'.

"The main character in *Project Dream* was initially a boyish adventurer called Edison – who inadvertently got tangled up with a bunch of no-good pirates. But we felt that Edison was too generic. So we tried a rabbit character that ran on two legs, and then a bear. People liked that bear, so the bear became Banjo and *Project Dream* became *Banjo-Kazooie*, and *Banjo-Kazooie* was born!

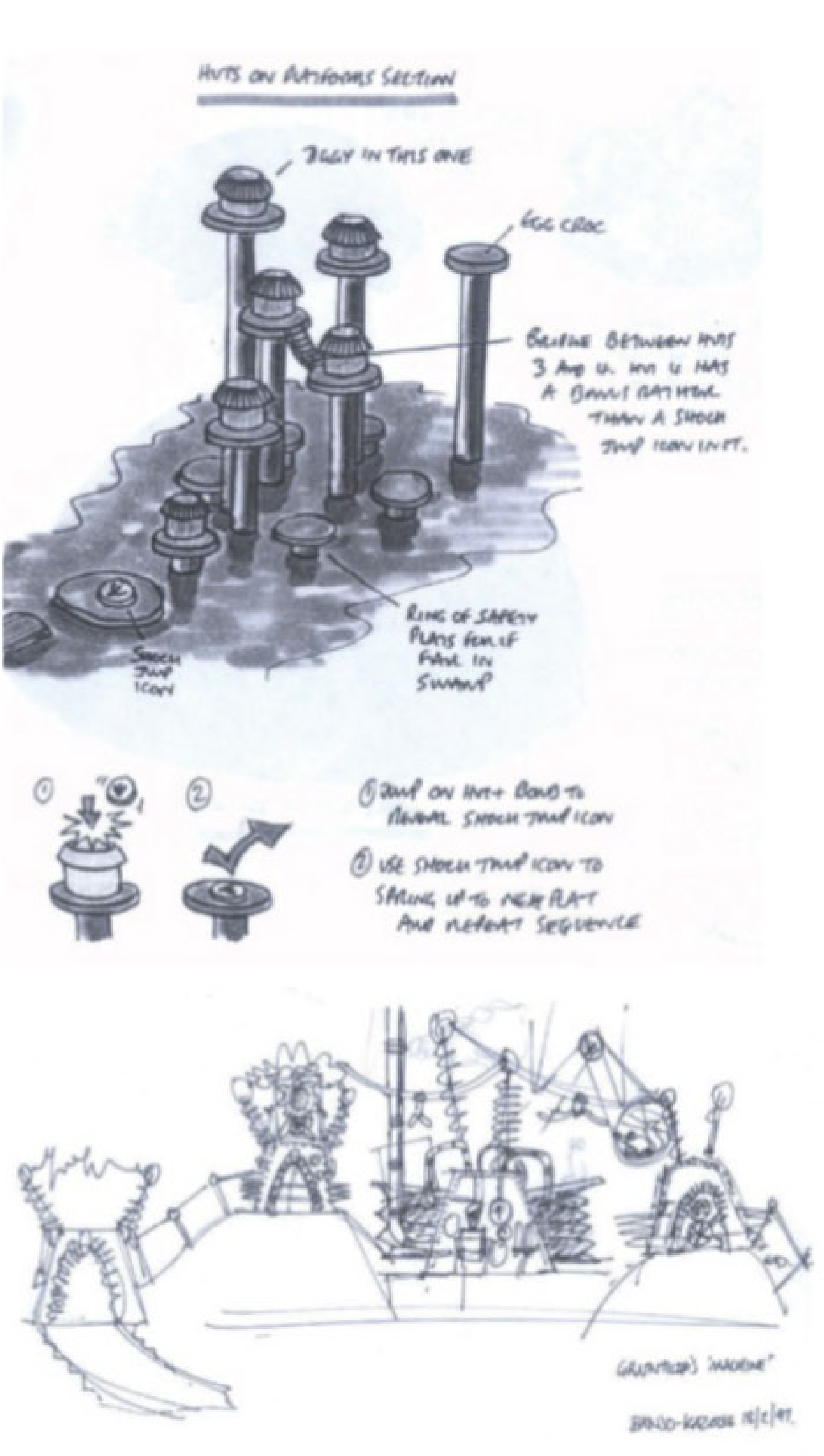
"*Project Dream* was the game that the original *Donkey Kong Country* team started on after they finished *DKC2*, and it was taking ACM (Advanced Computer Modelling) graphics tech to the next level. The introduction of the N64 made ACM obsolete, so we switched over to the new machine after a few months. *Project Dream* continued for about another year before we realised that the scope of the game meant it'd take years to complete…"

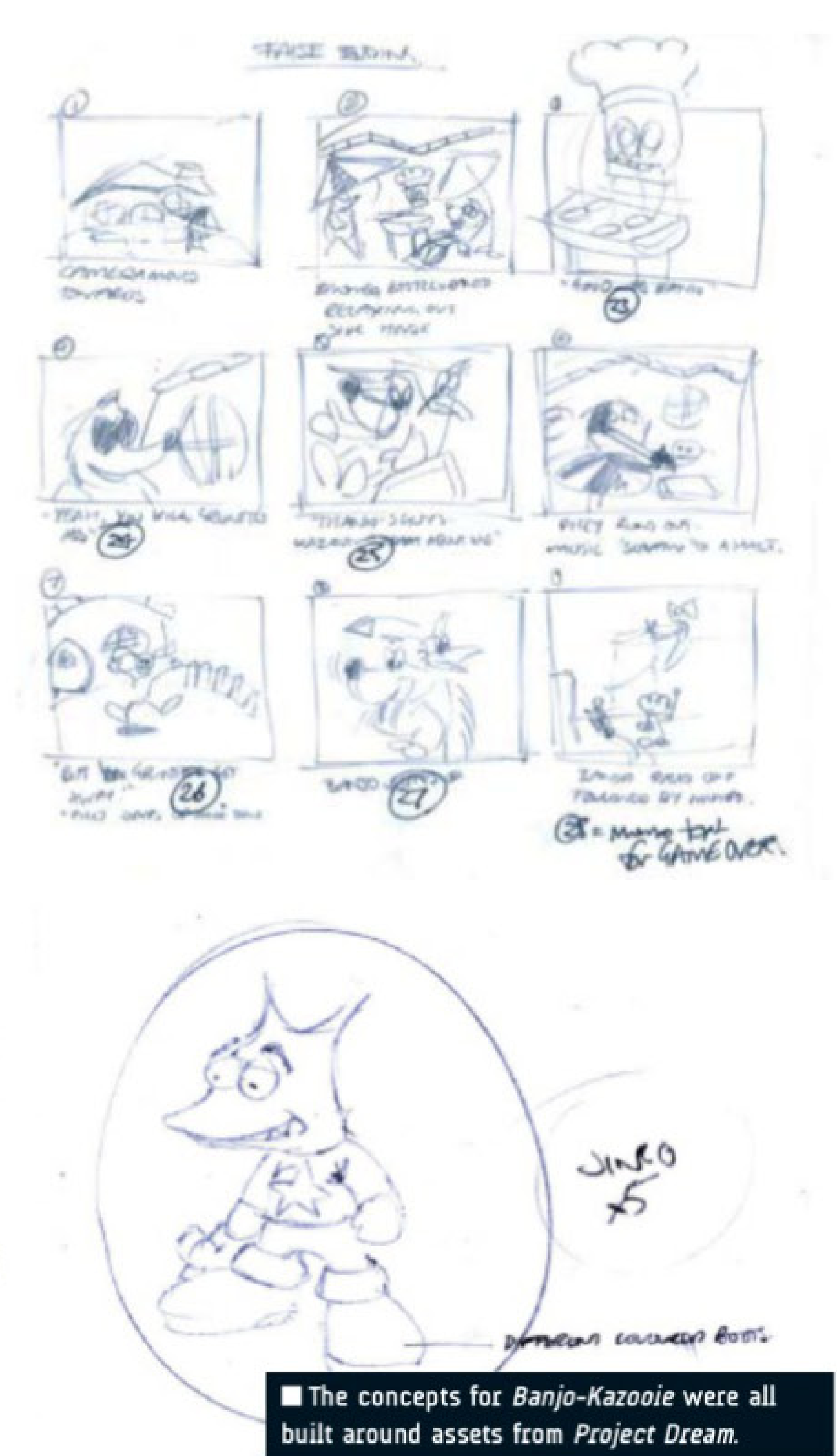
Banjo-Kazooie's lead programmer, Chris Sutherland, then explains why putting so much work into *Project Dream* wasn't necessarily such a bad thing: "Luckily, we were able to carry over a lot of the supporting code from *Dream* which meant that we were able to get the game out of the door in 15 months!" There was a period of two months prior to that, Sutherland reveals, where *Banjo-Kazooie* was still being made with the visual design of *Project Dream*, though that was dropped due to better accommodate the 3D design it became famous for.



■ Edison – with his shorts and fancy shirt – still had the blueprint of Banjo already.

"The main character in Project Dream was initially a boyish adventurer called Edison"





■ The concepts for *Banjo-Kazooie* were all built around assets from *Project Dream*.

50 BEST FREE TABLET GAMES

Owning a tablet opens the door to a cluttered app marketplace, making it hard work to figure out what the best deals are. Well, fear not: whether you possess an Android-based tablet or an Apple iPad, Google Play and the App Store are packed with hundreds of awesome games that cost absolutely zilch. Avoiding freemium models and focusing on the gaming experience first, get your fingertips at the ready, as games™ selects 50 free tablet games worthy of your attention

1 JETPACK JOYRIDE

A simple on-rails side-scroller that takes mere seconds to grasp but will drain hours before you put it down. *Jetpack Joyride*'s plucky premise masterfully matches simplistic design with addictive gameplay, while a vast pool of customisation options and upgrades keeps you firmly hooked. Get strapped in and brace yourself for a helluva ride.

2 CLARC

The hat is being tipped so low here that it threatens to fall off, but *Clarc*'s obvious ode to *Borderlands*' aesthetic and breakout character is just part of the tablet game's overall charm. A top-down puzzle game that utilises *Sokoban*-style block-pushing, by wrapping its brainteasers in a delightfully whimsical narrative, it stands tall among its genre brethren.

3 SECOND CHANCE HEROES

An action-RPG that has clones of Leonardo da Vinci, Abraham Lincoln and Joan of Arc slaughtering rampaging zombies, there's clearly much to love about Rocket City Studios' debut action-RPG. Co-op is the real boon here; it's a full-bodied and anarchic multiplayer experience.

4 HOPLITE

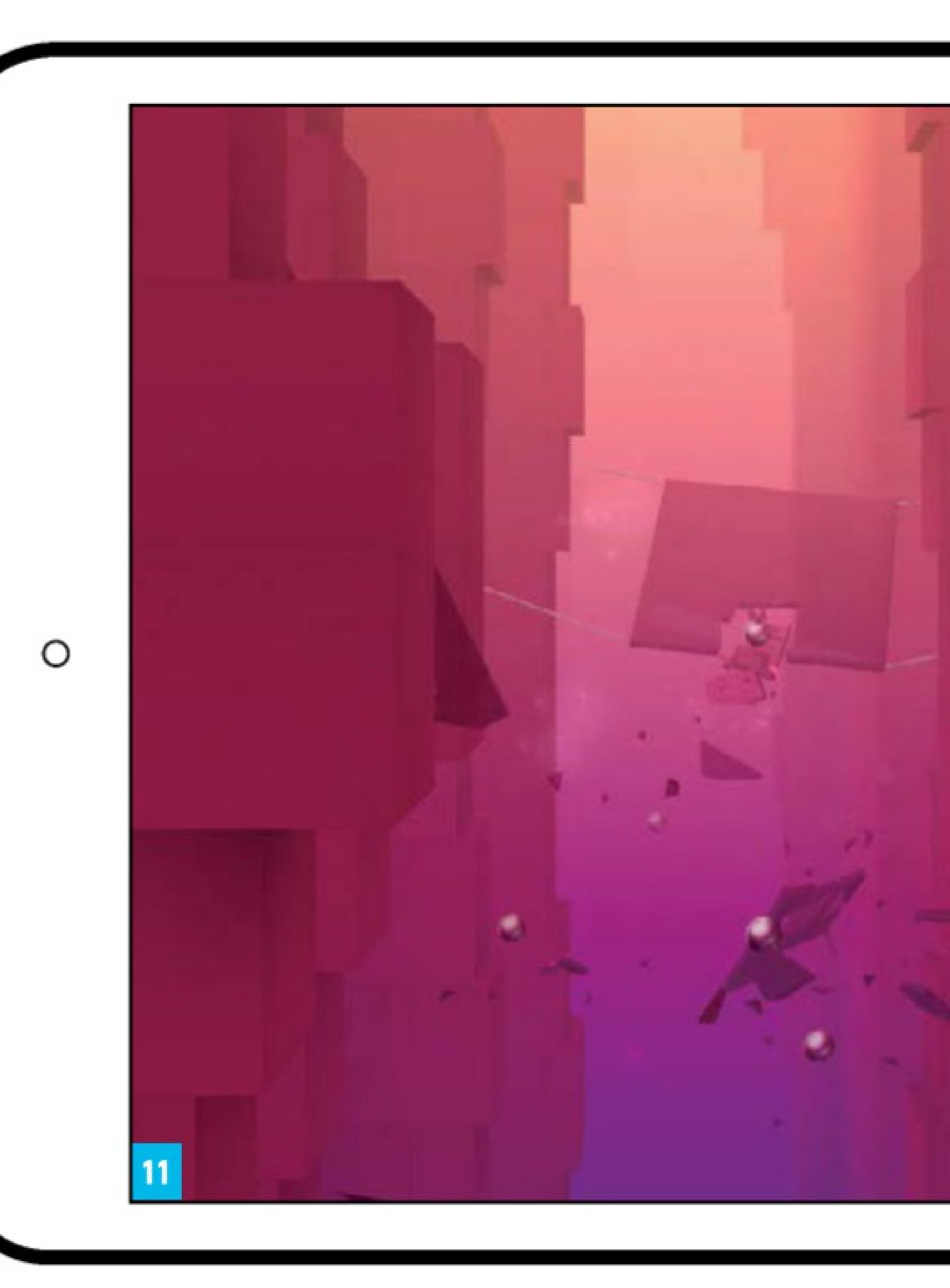
An immensely strategic chess-like game where players move around a board, dodging enemy attacks, while making their own offensive manoeuvres. Things get more complicated with the inclusion of combos and abilities, but gamers looking for depth and reward will be well catered-for here.

5 PUNCH QUEST

Not many games let you ride on the back of a laser-spewing velociraptor (although Ubisoft is likely taking notes). Then again, *Punch Quest* takes a more aggressive approach to the endless runner, having the player use an assortment of attacks and weapons to take out the legions of enemies between the protagonist and his unreachable utopia. In that respect it has more in common with classic side-scrolling beat-'em-ups, but with a vast array of power-ups and weapons, not to mention one eye on the leaderboards at all times, it'll be a quest you won't be abandoning in a hurry.

6 TEMPLE RUN 2

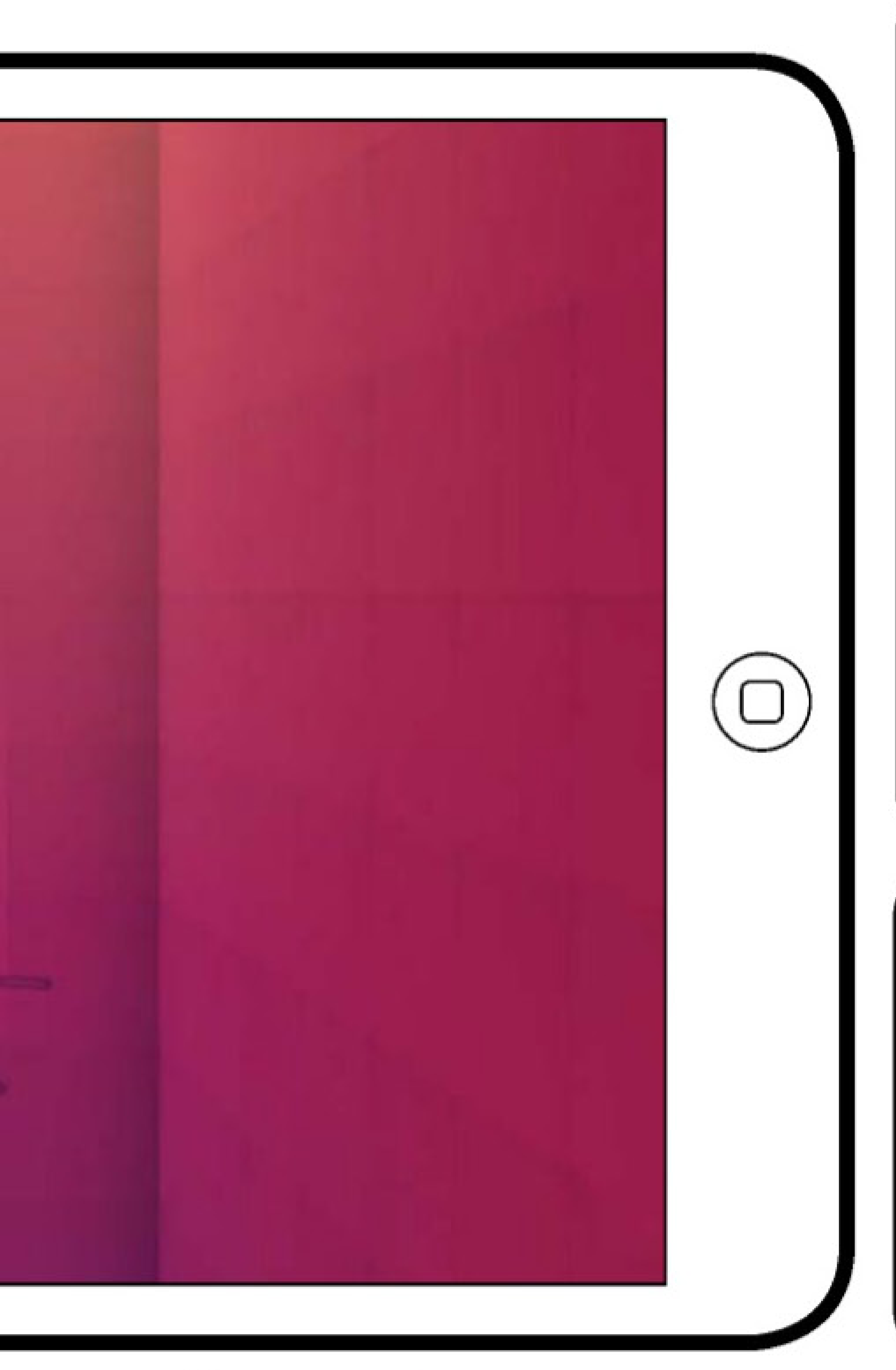
One of the most enduring of the endless runner games, *Temple Run 2* continues the theme of its predecessor in offering a non-stop sprint

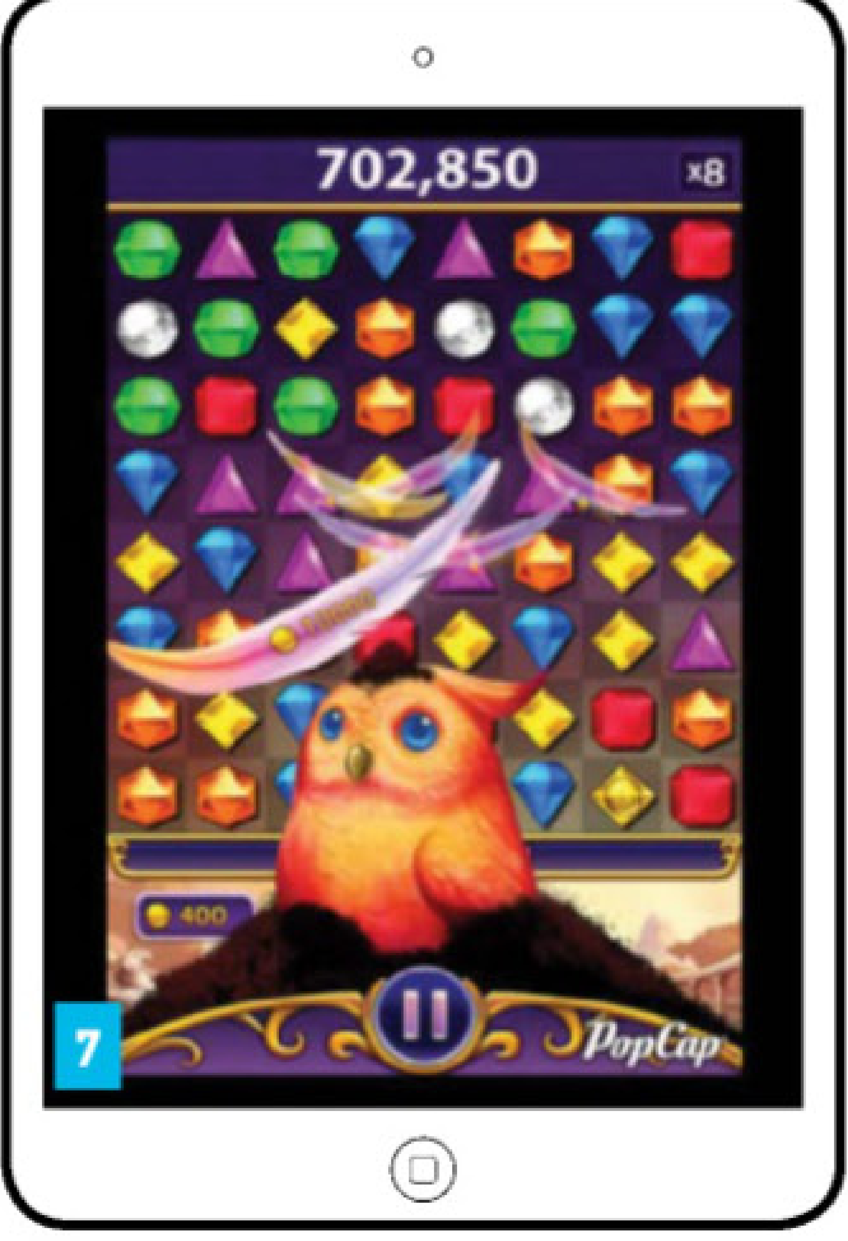


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towards high-score glory. Players avoid monsters, obstacles and collect coins, while power-ups and unlockables fuel the addictive gameplay further.

7 BEJEWELED BLITZ

A respected elder of the match-three subgenre, *Bejeweled Blitz*'s dominance has been threatened in the last few years by *Candy Crush Saga*. But where King's puzzle game implemented paywalls and cheap tricks, *Blitz* kept things relatively simple and is all the better for it.

8 2048

While a shameless rip-off of another popular game, *Threes!*, *2048* is a free alternative that matches the original concept with a slick presentation. A simple arithmetic game wherein you multiply corresponding blocks until you reach the titular 2048 square, it's surprisingly engrossing and sure to have you restarting again and again in dogged enthusiasm.

9 BADLAND

Free for Android users, while costing a couple of quid for iOS owners, Frogmind's physics-based puzzle title *Badland* wins out on Android devices. What's more, it's absolutely ace. Matching devilish level design with a vividly conceptualised world (inspired by *Limbo*, no less) there are few tablet games that equal its sheer inventive vim.

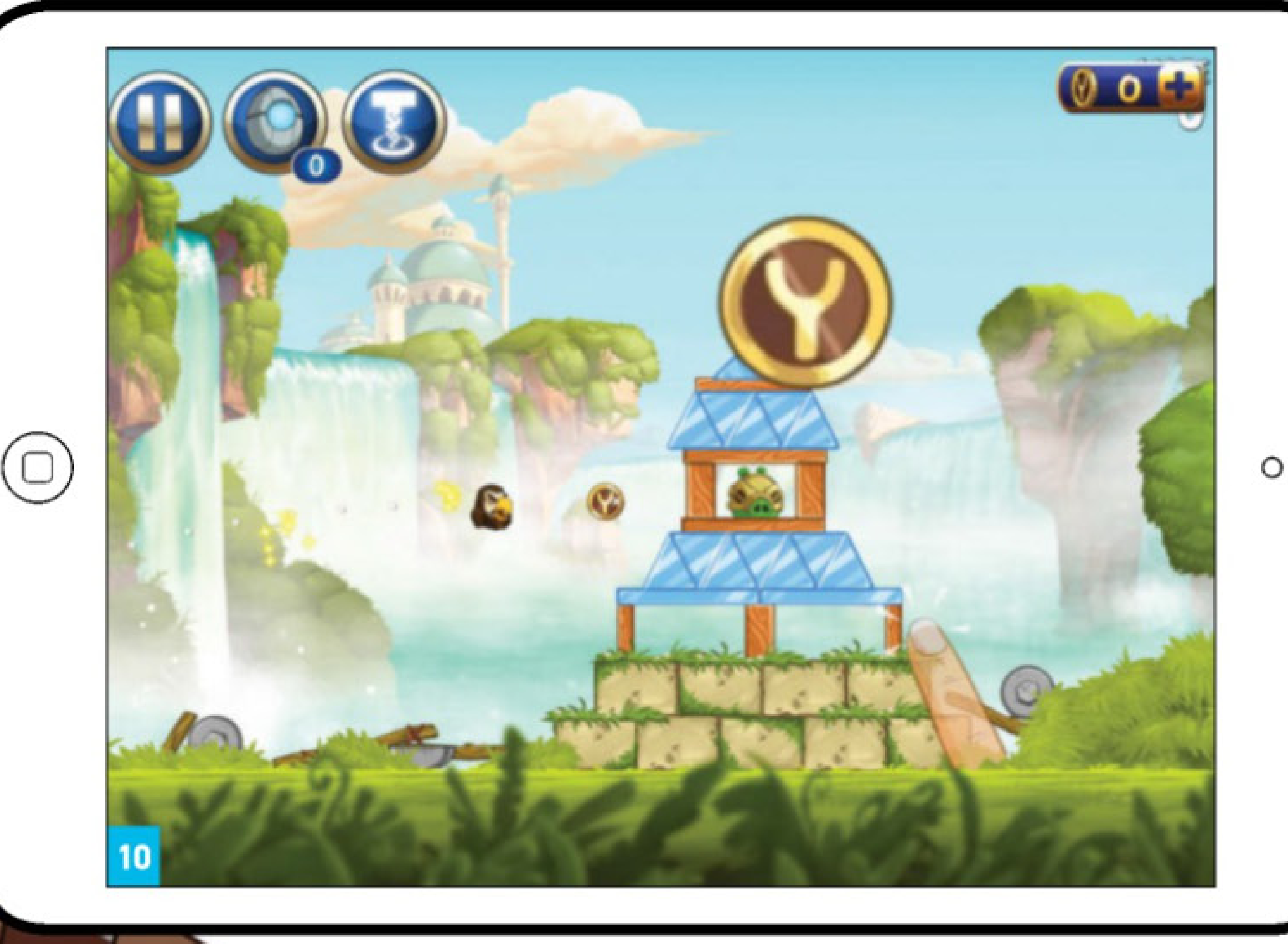
10 ANGRY BIRDS STAR WARS II

There's no shortage of free *Angry Birds* games on both marketplaces, but Rovio's *Star Wars*-themed entries rule the roost. The sequel is almost a greatest hits collection, boasting the series' best features, while even adding a few more to the formula (like the inclusion of NFC figurines). Recent years have seen the marketplace saturated by those clucking cannonballs, but when they're on top form there are few that can stand up against them.

11 SMASH HIT

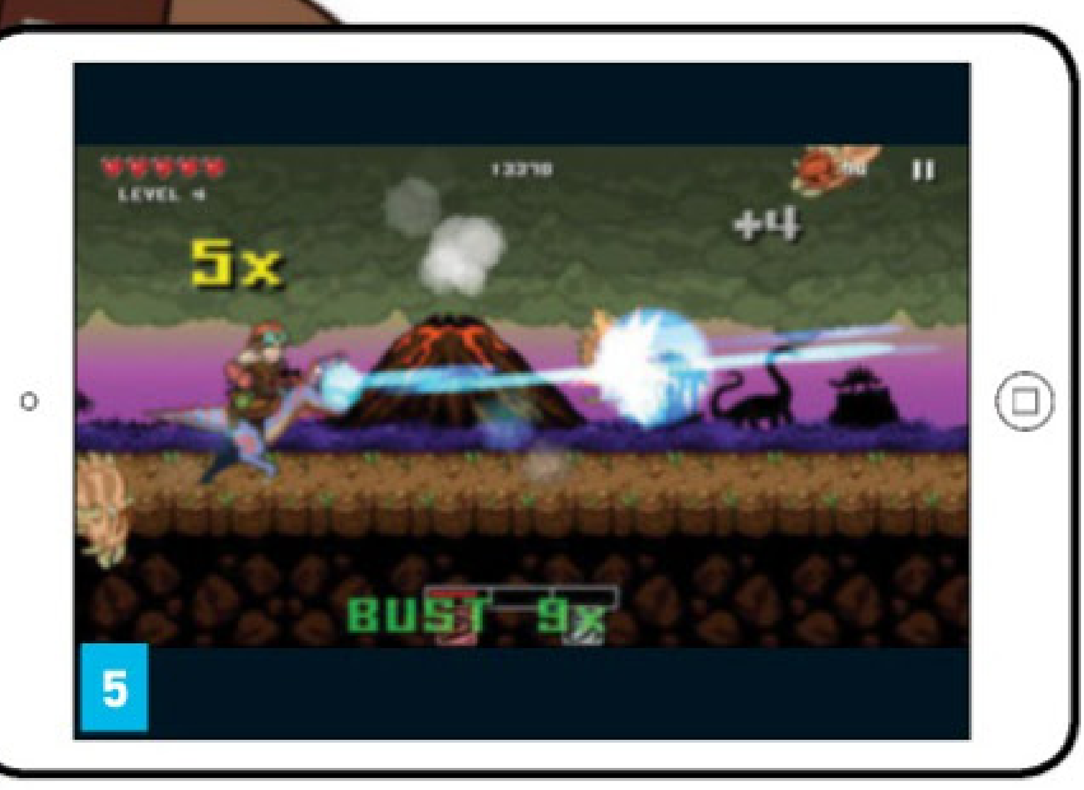
In this endless runner, your floating protagonist careers through what looks like an Eighties album cover, avoiding a maze of glass and obstacles. Your only weapon is a limited supply of metal balls that can be used to smash through surfaces and trigger doors. The importance of ball conservation and accuracy become more acute as you progress. It's the most fun you'll have smashing glass objects outside of doing the real thing.

"Punch Quest has more in common with classic side-scrolling beat-'em-ups, but with a vast array of power-ups and weapons"

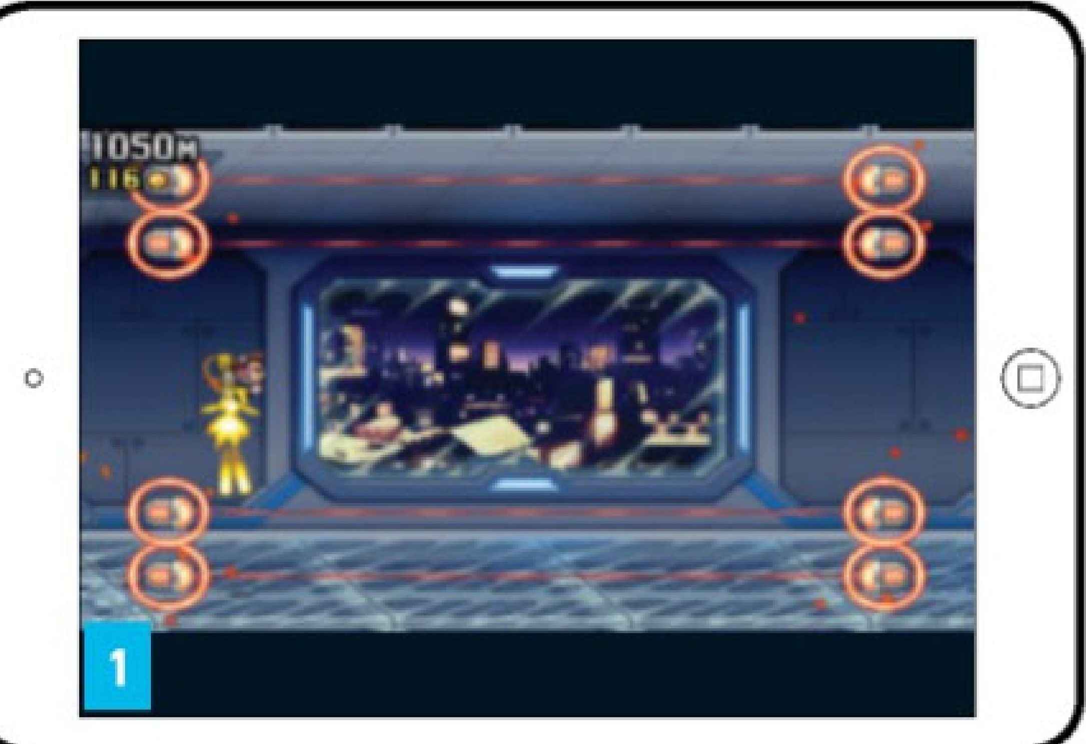

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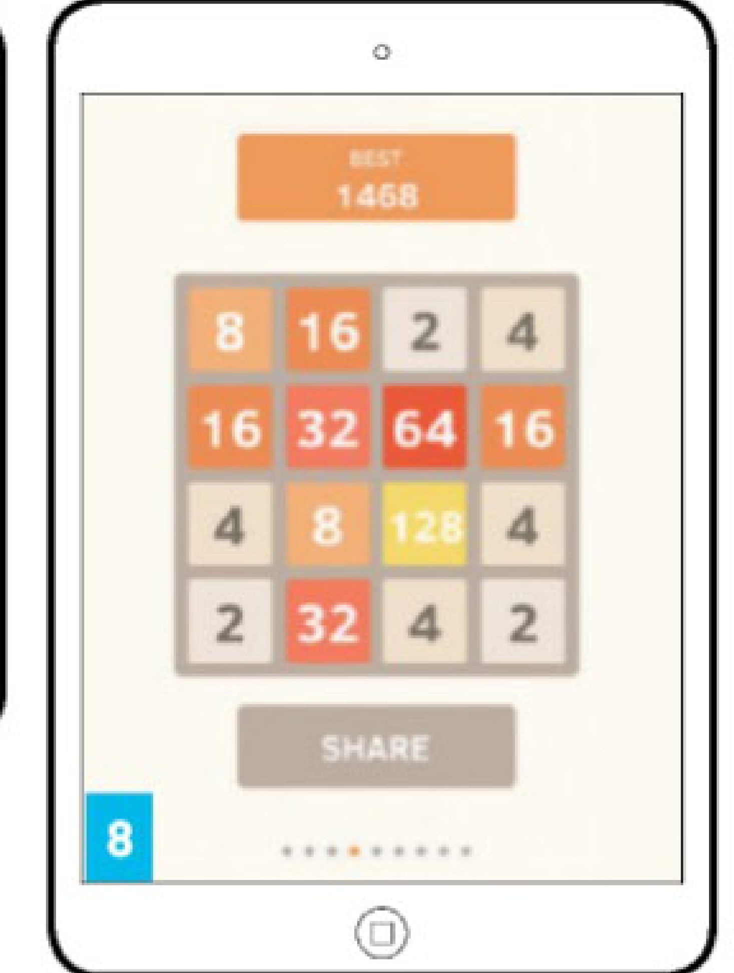

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12 NEW STAR SOCCER

A football management game with a neat twist: take complete control of one up-and-coming footballer both on and off the pitch. This includes keeping their social affairs in order, maintaining a destructive gambling addiction and making sure not to piss-off your manager. The on-field action is suitably captivating to boot.

13 TRACE

A strangely inviting mix of lateral-thinking puzzle-solving and pre-school art skills, this simple platformer has players making it from one side of the screen to the other by sketching doodles across rudimentary drawings.

“Words With Friends has lost none of its evergreen appeal in the years since everyone forced themselves to kick the habit”

14 HERO ACADEMY

An accessible but deeply tactical turn-based strategy game, *Hero Academy* has players picking a team and going up against a rival squad via asynchronous online play. While there are additional teams sold at a premium, there's enough here to keep skilled players invested for the long run.

15 TEKKEN CARD TOURNAMENT

Bandai Namco's fighting series is transformed into a turn-based free-to-play card game in *Tekken Card Tournament*. It takes some perseverance to work around its in-app purchases economy, but both its simplicity and pacing make it a worthwhile slog.

16 PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES 2

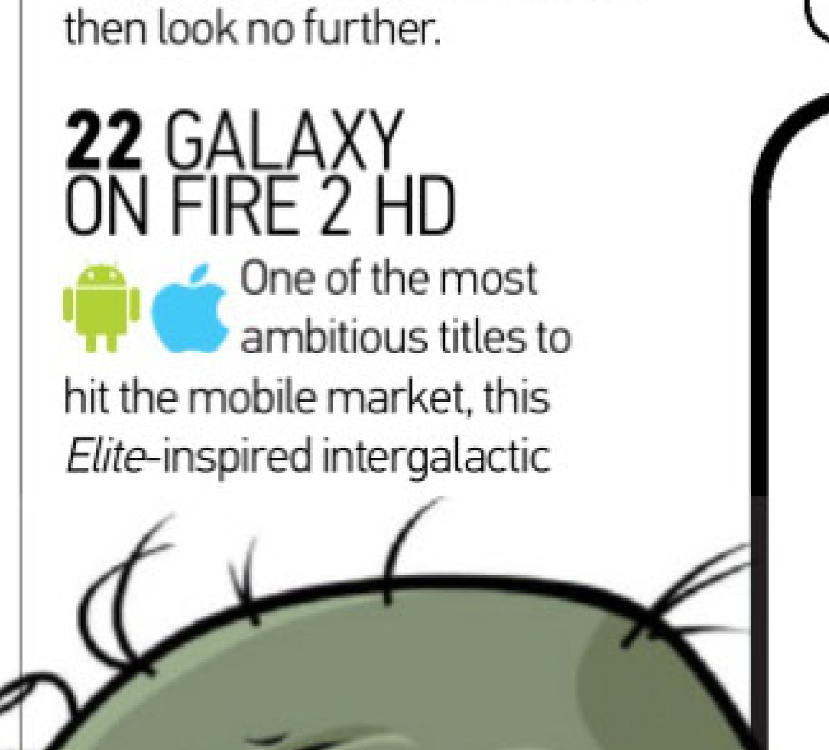
Courting some controversy since adopting a freemium business model, *Plants Vs. Zombies 2* nevertheless retains the endearing brilliance of PopCap's original tower defence game – just ignore all the superfluous micro-transaction frills that invade the screen intermittently.

17 WINTER WALK

There have been simulations of just about everything you can imagine: piloting a plane, captaining a spaceship hurtling through deepest darkest space and even operating a videogame development studio. But *Winter Walk* is perhaps first to put players in the shoes of a Victorian gentleman on his evening constitutional, battling against the elements as he struggles to maintain composure and keep his top hat firmly rested on his crown. There's not much game here to be fair: you see how far you can walk before your hat tumbles off, holding your finger on the screen to keep your cap on whenever the wind blows. But what it succeeds in is presenting a fresh spin on a trite concept, and offering an amusingly characterful jaunt – the perfect accompaniment to a refreshing cup of tea.

18 HOPELESS: THE DARK CAVE

A strangely horrifying survival title wherein you control a group of light-radiating gelatinous bobs marooned in the darkness of a cave. Fending off invading monsters with a gun, the tension is such that you'll often find yourself shooting would-be allies who come to join your cause.



19 ELECTROMASTER

Holding down your finger to charge up an almighty electrical blast is the simplistic conceit of this neatly-presented action game that belies its underlying bastard-hardness. Try clearing a screen of meandering enemies without losing a life. Go on – we dare you to.

20 WORDS WITH FRIENDS

Words With Friends has lost none of its evergreen appeal in the years since everyone forced themselves to kick the habit. It's *Scrabble* with an insufferable time delay, but pitting your vocabulary against a pal's never gets boring. Isn't it time you relapsed?

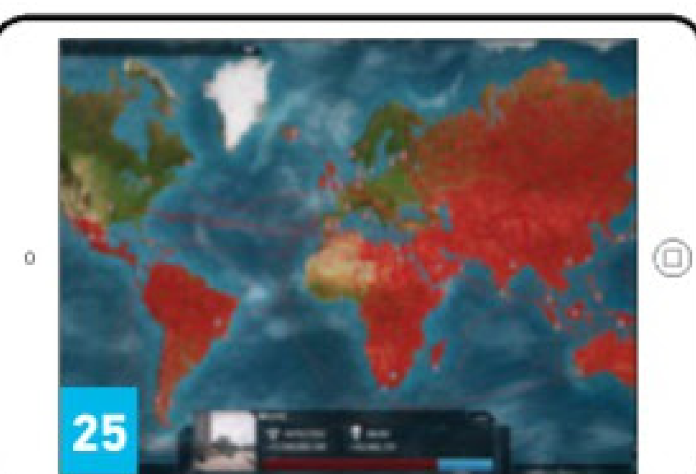
21 POCKET LEAGUE STORY 2

Another Japanese micro-simulation title from Kairosoft, *Pocket League Story 2* uses pixel-art cute as a veneer to cover the politics and unscrupulous business management behind football. If you're looking for a twee alternative to *Football Manager* then look no further.

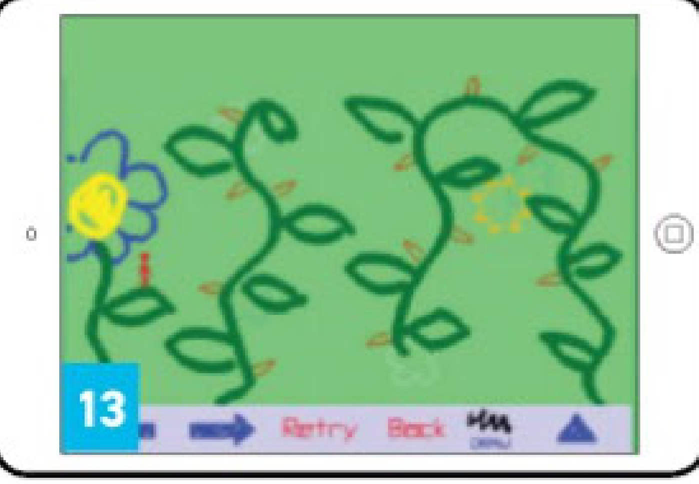
22 GALAXY ON FIRE 2 HD

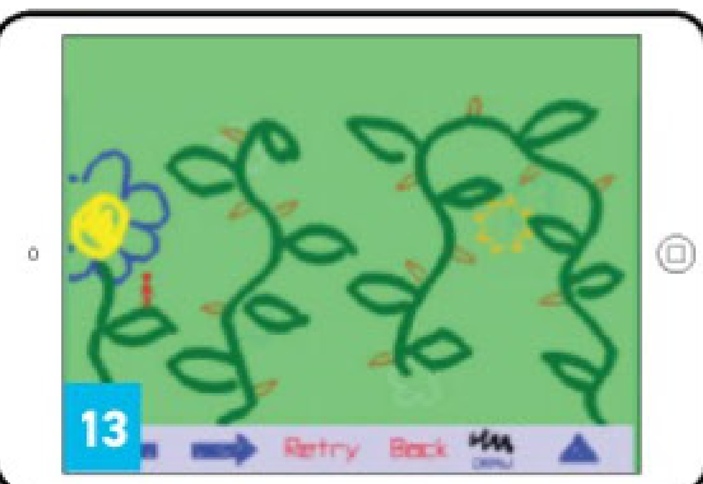
One of the most ambitious titles to hit the mobile market, this *Elite*-inspired intergalactic







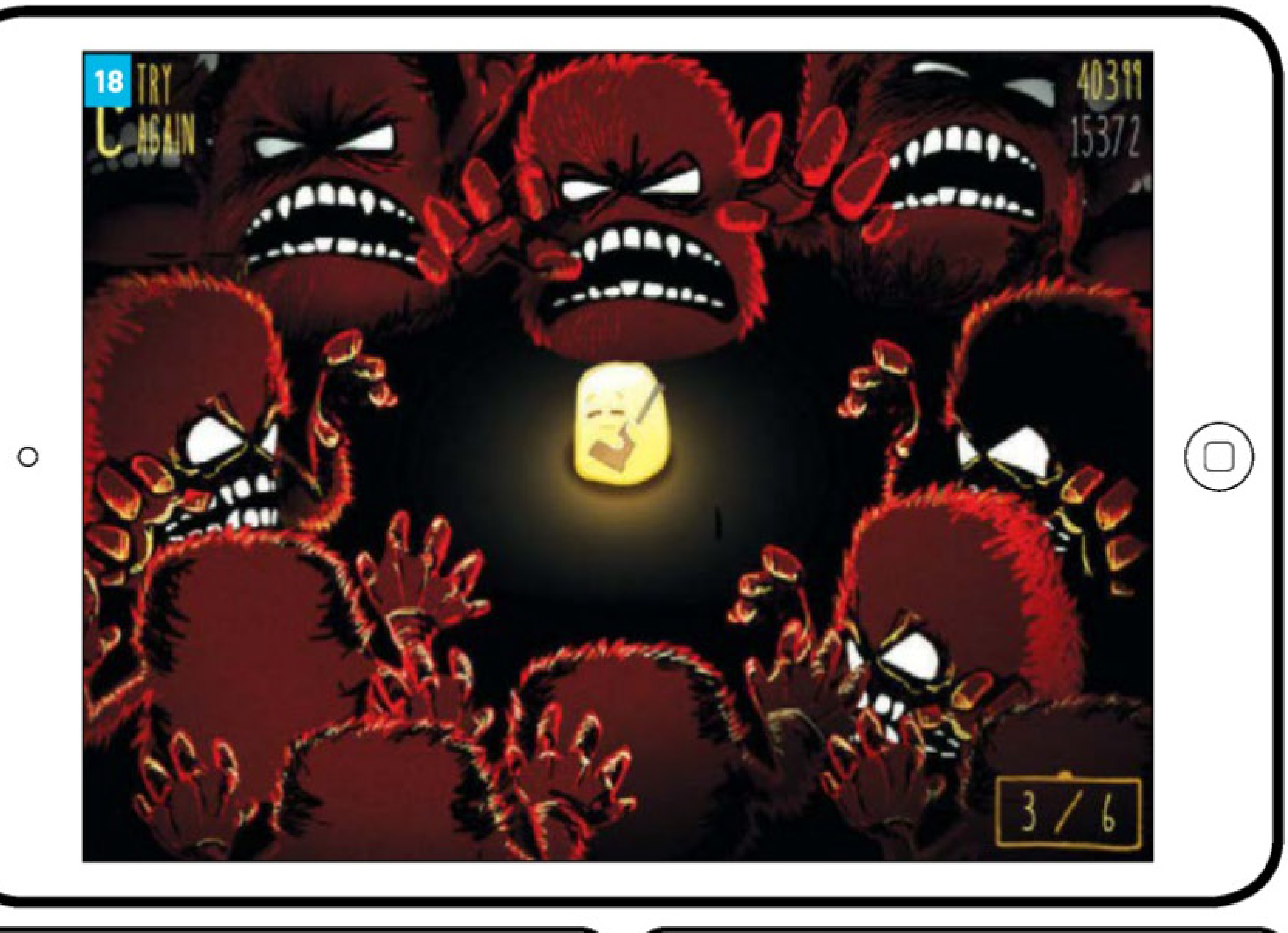


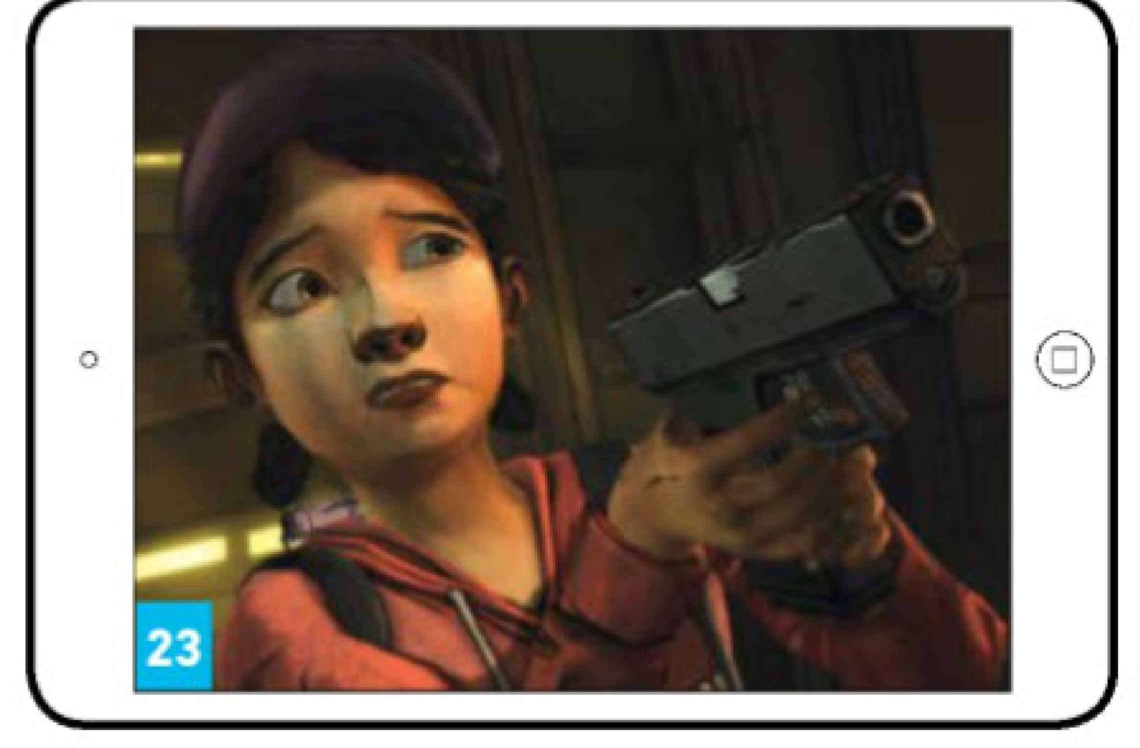




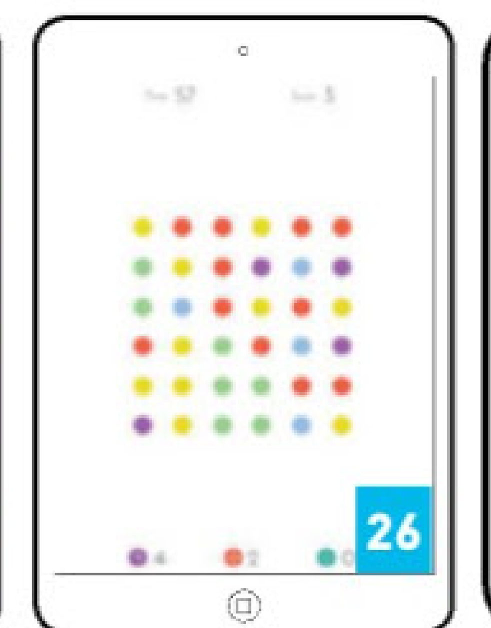




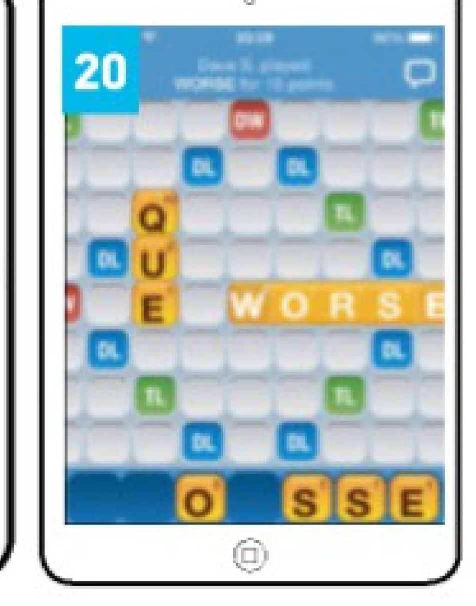


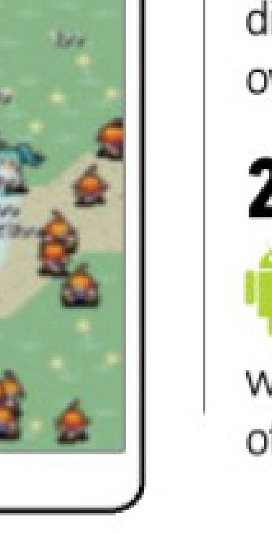


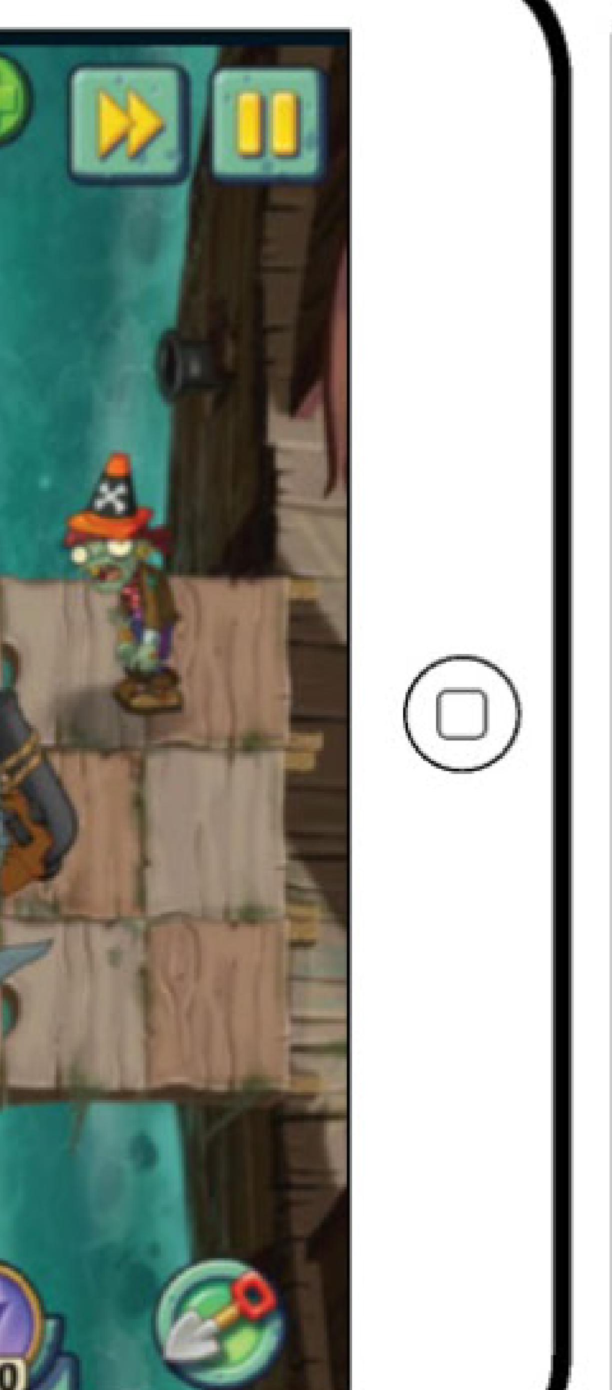




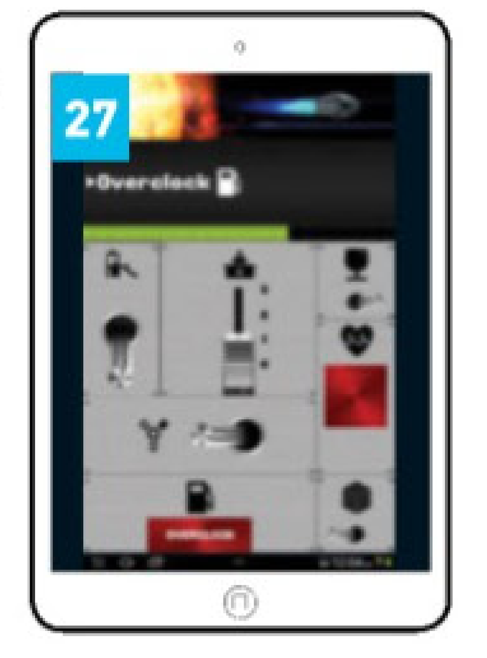




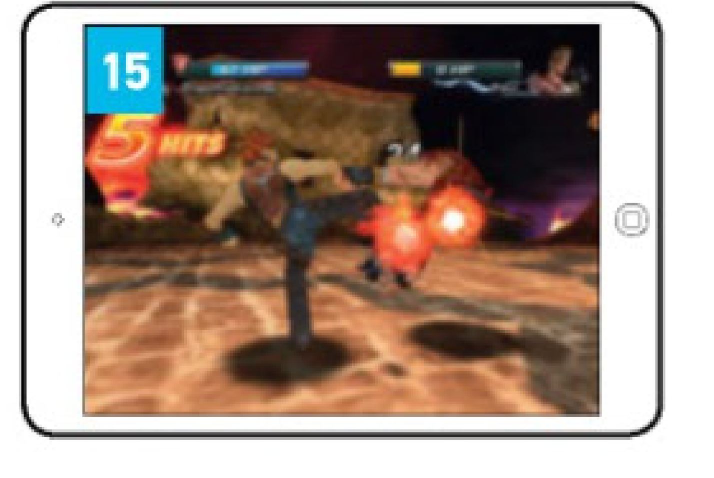












shooter has an acute focus on combat, but boasts a vast universe to explore. Above all that, you'll be hard-pressed to find a better-looking game on a tablet.

23 THE WALKING DEAD: THE GAME

While only the first episode of Telltale Games' critically revered take on the comic book is available for free (likewise for the developer's *The Wolf Among Us*), those who have yet to check-in with Lee, Clementine and their band of misfit survivors would do well starting here. Drawn with loving reverence to its source material, while packing in more emotional wallop than the entirety of the brand's own big-budget television drama, the first episode does much to draw vivid portraits of each of the main players. A warning: after a couple of hours playing this you'll have an appetite for much more.

24 REAL RACING 3

EA has gone to great pains to hit a sweet spot with its free-to-play model, and that's nowhere better exemplified than *Real Racing 3* – its mobile answer to *Forza* and *Gran Turismo*. The visual fidelity alone is hugely impressive, but the suite of technical features, licensed cars and selection of tracks make it undisputedly best in class.

25 PLAGUE INC.

Another case of free on Android but priced on the App Store, *Plague Inc.* has you playing the bad guy (in this case a pan-catastrophic virus) as you attempt to wipe out humanity before a cure is discovered. It's a build-your-own-apocalypse adventure.

26 DOTS

A simple match-three style game wherein you interlink a series of coloured dots to make them disappear. However, *Dots* is bolstered by its clean design aesthetic – more graphic design than game design. Still, like some of the best apps on the market, it's the impeccable pairing of sleek visuals and gameplay that makes it an essential experience.

27 SPACETEAM

One of the quirkier multi-device party games currently available on tablets. You and three friends operate a spaceship hurtling through the galaxy attempting to outrun an exploding star. Play if you quite like silly team games; avoid if you're not a fan of arguments over discharging Clip-jawed Fluxtrunions.

28 ZEN PINBALL HD

The next best thing to owning your own pinball table, *Zen Pinball* has cornered the market on virtual facsimiles of popular cabinets from all eras. The base game is enjoyable enough but there's always *Star Wars*, Marvel and other licensed tables that can be purchased within the app.

29 HEROES OF ORDER & CHAOS

A genre that is beginning to pick up steam on tablets, *Heroes Of Order & Chaos* is quickly becoming the quintessential MOBA experience on mobile devices. With new characters to use each week for free there's plenty of variety on offer and the intuitive control scheme proves that you don't need a mouse and keyboard to make MOBA work.

30 ASPHALT 8: AIRBORNE

Tablet devices have defied expectations and proven to be a more than serviceable platform for racing games. Taking a leaf out of *Need For Speed*'s racing manual, *Asphalt 8: Airborne* matches arcade racing with the thrills of jumps and bone-crunching collisions.



31 FIFA 14

EA has once again effectively matched its free-to-play strategy to another solid sporting sim, this time football under the *FIFA* brand. Smart touch-screen controls make this both a user-friendly and tactile football title that matches its technical prowess with sharp visuals.

32 FRONTLINE COMMAND: D-DAY

First-person shooters on tablets have a bad rap but this effort from Glu Games wisely plays to the strengths of its native platforms, opting for shooting gallery set pieces over a free-roaming 3D world.

33 GASKETBALL

A fiendish spin on the classic game of H.O.R.S.E, *Gasketball* hands players a series of tools for creating an obstacle-strewn basketball court to challenge online foes to complete. There are over 100 single-player levels, but the multiplayer has a real mean streak that'll keep you coming back for more.

34 INTO THE DEAD

Zombies have become as ubiquitous as the endless runner, so it was only a matter of time before the two inexplicably popular subgenres found themselves crossing paths. However, *Into The Dead* is a surprisingly sharp result of the pairing, as your human survivor dashes through zombie-infested fields in a break for salvation. You can grab firearms and make a few of the undead a bit deader, while the first-person perspective and black-and-white visuals add an impressively disquieting atmosphere to the action.

35 HEARTHSTONE: HEROES OF WARCRAFT

Blizzard took everyone by surprise earlier in the year when it released its *Warcraft* spin-off card game, *Hearthstone*, and its tablet iteration successfully translates the action to touch-screen devices without diluting the gameplay experience. Hugely popular with the PC community, the mobile iteration has garnered its own impressive following due to its intuitive touch controls and convenient portability. With *Hearthstone*, Blizzard has done for card games what it did with *World Of Warcraft* and the MMO: created a genre-dominating experience both rich in depth and addictive.

36 ROBOT UNICORN ATTACK 2

A Canabalt clone that wins on pure charm alone. Sure, the sequel doesn't have Erasure's melodic tones on the soundtrack (unless you pay extra) but what's not to love about chrome-laced fantasy beasts smashing rocks up with their head-horns?

37 SID MEIER'S ACE PATROL

Part of the endless pantheon of *Sid Meier* titles, *Ace Patrol* enables players to engage in tactical air combat against the backdrop of World War I. There are 120 missions available, asynchronous multiplayer combat and a range of premium content available to boost the stats of your airborne death machine.

38 LETTERPRESS

A spin on the phenomenally popular *Words With Friends*, this competitive word-'em-up has players vying for control of letters across the board, which ups the intensity of your average *Scrabble*-like game. Cheating is easy but play with friends and keep your conduct sportsmanlike.

39 COLOSSEUM HEROES

There's nothing particularly original about *Colosseum Heroes*, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. What's on offer is a brawny hack-and-slash where you cut through waves of enemies to find a key that unlocks the next stage. A load of big, dumb fun.

40 INGRESS

For decades, games have transported players to interesting places, but only a few have actually taken gamers out of the house. Invented by Google, Ingress actually demands its players to explore the physical world around them, visiting points of interest in the local area and beyond. It's an augmented reality strategy game, where players take sides in a convoluted narrative that boils down to red versus blue, visiting local attractions to progress and score points for your side. While it's essentially no different than 'checking in' on Facebook, its presentation creates an engaging fantasy world around you where even ordinary-seeming places are dense with mythology and intrigue.

> **"Ingress' presentation creates an engaging fantasy world around you where even ordinary-seeming places are dense with mythology"**

41 POCKET PLANES

A tremendous amount of game can be found in this tablet offering, which provides carrot-on-a-stick gameplay that urges you to play for *just that little longer*. Manage an airport and then expand it across the globe. There is simulation, strategy and personality aplenty inside *Pocket Planes'* inviting game world.

42 BEASTIE BAY

Kairosoft matches its traditional management sim experience with *Pokémon*'s rabid enthusiasm for collecting creatures, all set inside a tropical island builder. It's more successful at the former than it is the latter but the fusion of both gameplay styles will keep you busy for weeks.



43 CUT THE ROPE

Cut The Rope's popularity has endured as long as *Angry Birds*' (if not quite matching its rival in lucrative marketing opportunities). Accessible gameplay (slice some string and feed a dino-house-pet-thing some candy – as simple as that), challenging design and charming visuals – it's mobile gaming 101.

44 STAR WARS: TINY DEATH STAR

In a galaxy far, far away the Emperor is once again building the Death Star and now it's time to put your architectural skills to the test floor by floor. Yes, it's just *Tiny Tower* with chibi *Star Wars* characters but there's enough new about this remix to make it worthy of your attention.

45 REAPER

Action games are hard to get right on touch-screen devices but *Reaper* has a mechanical slickness bolstered by an engaging visual palette that makes it all seem effortless. A blood-soaked hoot from start to finish, slightly cramped fingers will never feel more triumphant than this.

46 HERO SIEGE

A twin-stick shooter speckled with RPG elements to enliven the routine combat. It doesn't offer much in the way of character and story, but it all seems irrelevant when you've got endless waves of enemies to slay, loot to collect and an impressively robust arsenal at your disposal. It's worth a punt if you're in cathartic need for violence.

47 VOXEL RUSH

Older gamers will remember the ZX Spectrum's *Deathchase* – a game that had you hurtling through a forest avoiding trees and gun-toting bad guys. *Voxel Rush* takes the premise and updates it, adding 3D graphics and skews the perspective to create an intensely exhilarating race. The controls are completely tilt-based, and you gain points for driving close to collapsing voxel pillars. In fact, it's the series of events that keeps the blood pumping, with the aforementioned pillar collapses, narrow tunnels and gravity flips, creating a gratifying endurance trial.

48 VECTOR


Another *Canabalt*-style side-scrolling parkour game that manages to stand out among the clones with its stylish visuals and lip-gnawingly challenging campaign. Even once you've sprinted, vaulted and rolled your way through each level, your completionist brain will have you coming back just to ace those three-star ratings.

49 PIXEL DUNGEON

A roguelike title that uses pixel-art (surprise!) as the front for its fantastical subterranean adventure. However, there's plenty to be excited about here, not least its relentless challenge that'll have you bounding into danger again and again in order to discover the mystical Amulet Of Yendor.

50 SUPER STICKMAN GOLF 2

Indie devs have embraced taking simple sports titles and injecting a dash of absurdity. In that regard, *Super Stickman Golf 2* isn't so much a golf game as it is a finger-flicking, time-sapping casual title inspired by *Worms* and *Angry Birds*.


50
BEST
FREE TABLET
GAMES
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SHOOT THE CANNON
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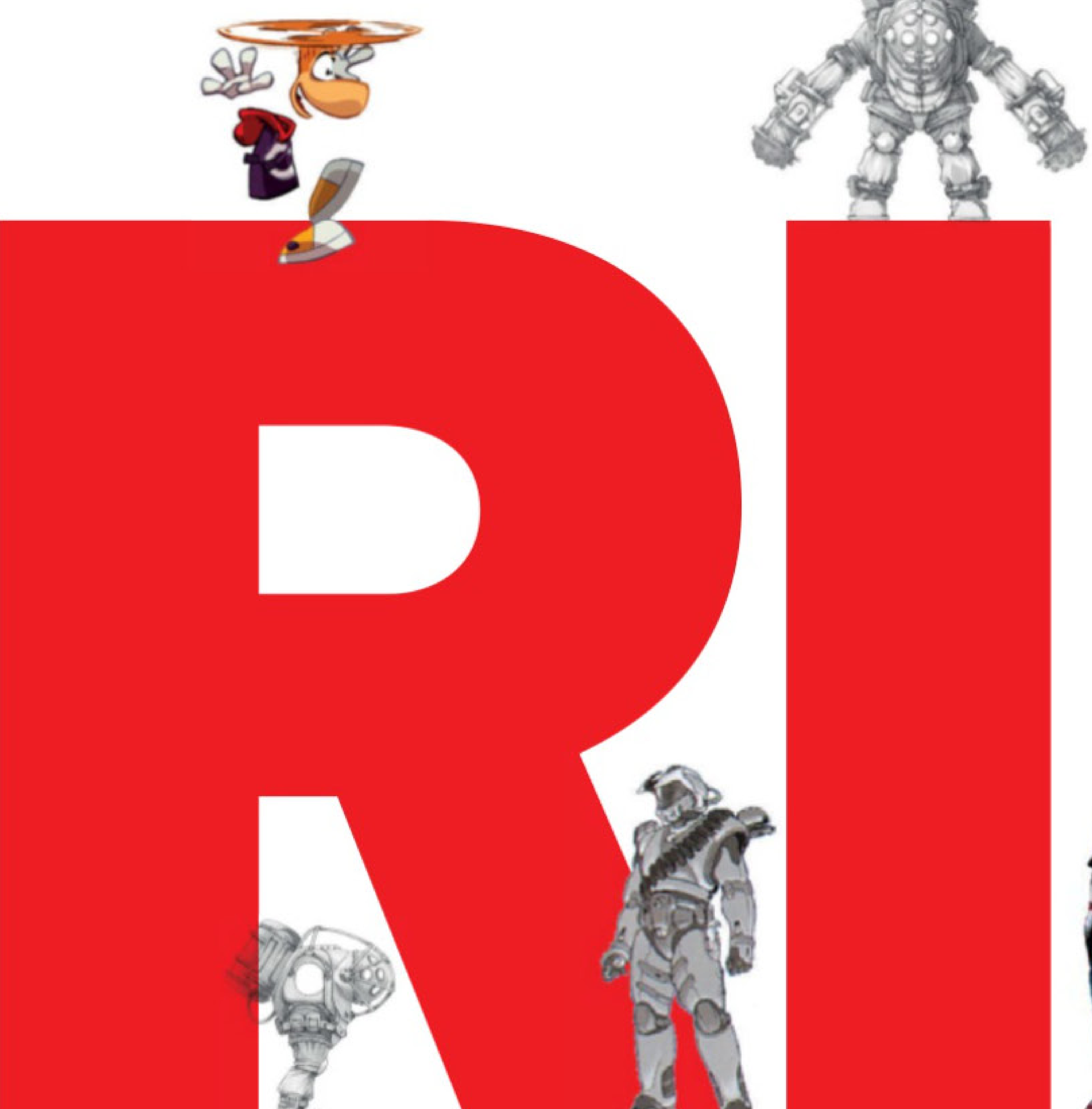
How to create the next MA

HOW DO YOU CREATE A VIDEOGAME ICON? **GAMES™** QUIZZES THE GAMES INDUSTRY TO FIND OUT THE SECRET FORMULA BEHIND CREATING THE MOST ICONIC CHARACTERS TO EVER GRACE THE MEDIUM

A trademark moustache that came to be because of graphical limitations; an homage to every single Eighties action film; a character originally a man, but changed into a woman in order to get more attention for a game – there are a lot of ways icons come into being. They're rarely designed with the thought ahead of time that they'll still be featured in games 20 years down the line, but that's the way it sometimes goes.

Gaming has been through a few generations not just of hardware, but of the characters who stare out at the player, feature in magazines like this one in your hands and act as the focal point for all the attention lavished on a title. We've seen the stick figures and artwork that didn't quite represent the quality of in-game graphics, the mascot era where everybody was trying to copy Mario or Sonic, the second wave of mascots with Crash Bandicoot, Spyro and Blinx not quite reaching the same heights as their forebears and, now, we see the era of the protagonist. The main character. The angry man with the gun who sells games.

With the current generation still trying to find its feet, it's natural for people to start looking forward to what icons will be returning – and what icons are in the making. Will the PS4 be home to the new Mario? Can Xbox One be the birthplace of a true heir to Sonic's throne? Could the resurgent Wii U be the birthplace of this »





» generation's Gordon Freeman? Probably not on the latter, but it's certainly not impossible.

Over time the designs of our gaming icons have changed, moving away from mascots and towards a more realistic, relatable approach. It's understandable in certain ways, given the technological leaps involved in each generation of gaming – deeper narrative structures lead to characters we can identify with more, which in turn creates a desire for more 'realistic' characters. One of the first major icons that resonated well with the hardcore crowd wasn't even one who spoke, with *Half-Life*'s Gordon Freeman walking a line quite different to the ever-more-loquacious Sonic the Hedgehog and signalling the beginning of something new in gaming. The bespectacled theoretical physicist looked like your archetypal nerd and, even though his face was never actually seen in the game, he became an overnight icon for modern gaming.

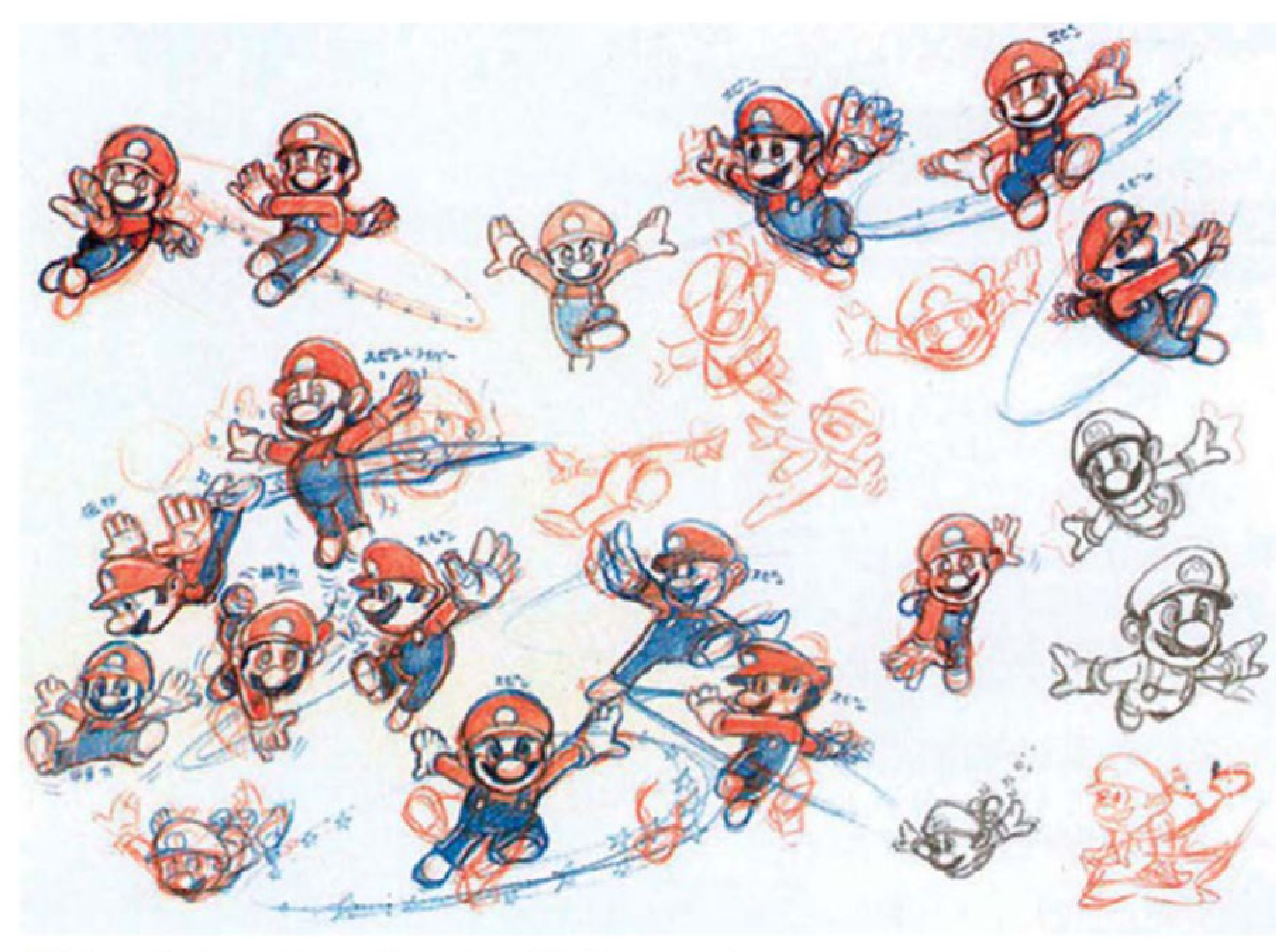
Few gaming icons resonate with this 'realistic' way of thinking more than one Nathan Drake, star of the *Uncharted* series and textbook gaming everyman. You can almost picture yourself knowing a guy like Drake – cocky yet flawed, handsome but not vain. And he was always meant to be like this, as Neil Druckmann, creative director at Naughty Dog told us: "On *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, we approached the design of characters with a different mindset than our previous games," he said, "Instead of making character concepts with a flashy look, our approach was to think of the character design as if we were casting actors in a movie and thinking of their outfits as grounded costumes. With Nate we wanted to capture the look of an everyman. For his clothes, it needed to feel like he wasn't prepared for being lost in the jungle – which is why he wears a simple long sleeve shirt, jeans, and sneakers."

But with this realism and relatability comes a need for the character to progress – the designs of Mario and Sonic have changed a little over the years, but there's been little you would call *progression* in the way they look, the way they act. With Drake we've seen these changes – the first ever footage of *Uncharted* on PS4 showed a weary, crow's feet-riddled Drake not looking entirely up for his next adventure. "The idea with Drake is that you're playing someone that is always at the edge of his abilities," Druckmann said, "Seeing his vulnerability both physically and psychologically makes him more human and therefore allows a deeper connection to his character."

And this ability to resonate and connect with an audience works on a more ideas-driven level, too: "Drake embodies the idea of escapism," Druckmann explained, "He lives freely, follows his calling to go on these larger-than-life adventures around the world. He overcomes great obstacles. [And] his aesthetic design is always relatively simple and grounded. When you see him, you feel like, 'Oh, I dress like that.'" There are clearly other, more subtle, aspects of design that come into play with this process of progression, though, like how Drake's outfits have changed over the years. As Druckmann explained: "Drake wears a darker outfit in the beginning of *Uncharted 2* when we see that he's more down on his luck, reverting to his criminal upbringings."

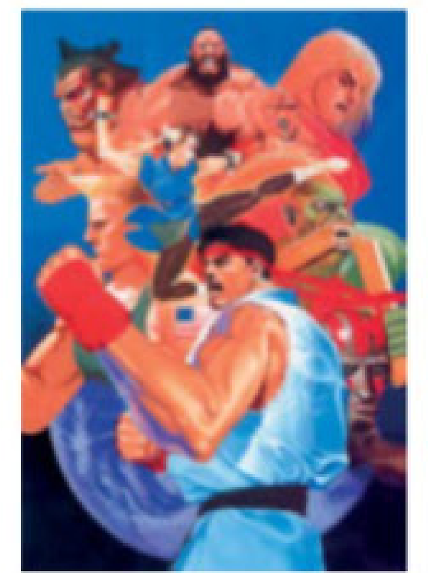
Druckmann was pretty clear, however, on what he thought the ultimate appeal of Drake was: "Ultimately, though, I believe Drake's biggest draw is who he is as a person. He has complex relationships with friends and foes. He's brave while having very human flaws, such as greed and ambition. In the end, though, he's someone who's good at heart; someone who would stick his neck out for the people he cares for."

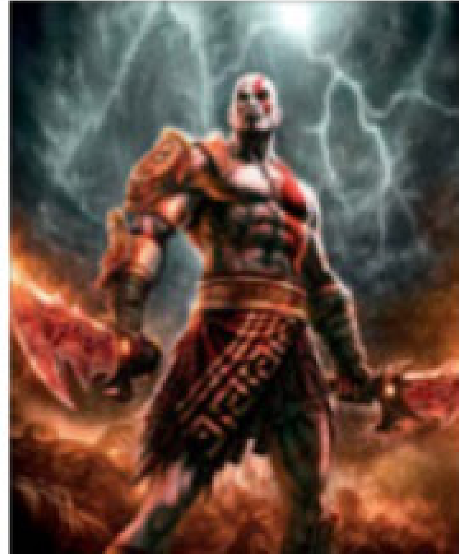
But, more often than not, that realism wasn't there from the get go for gaming icons – sometimes it takes a total redesign to take a character away from being a long-worn out joke and back into

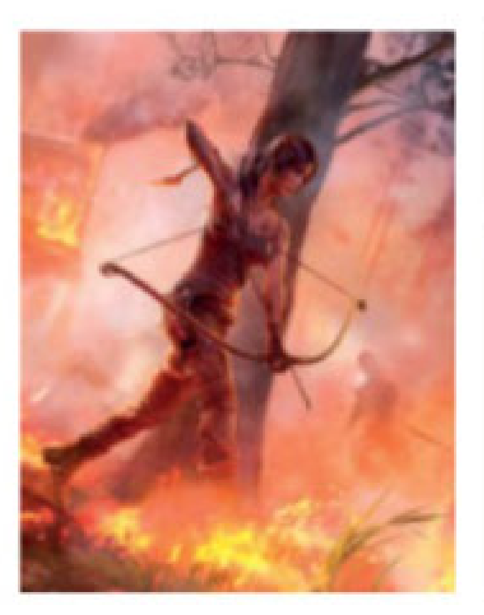


Mario was already around 20 years old when *Super Mario Galaxy* came out, but a new game meant new potential for his design – though, of course, not with any huge changes.

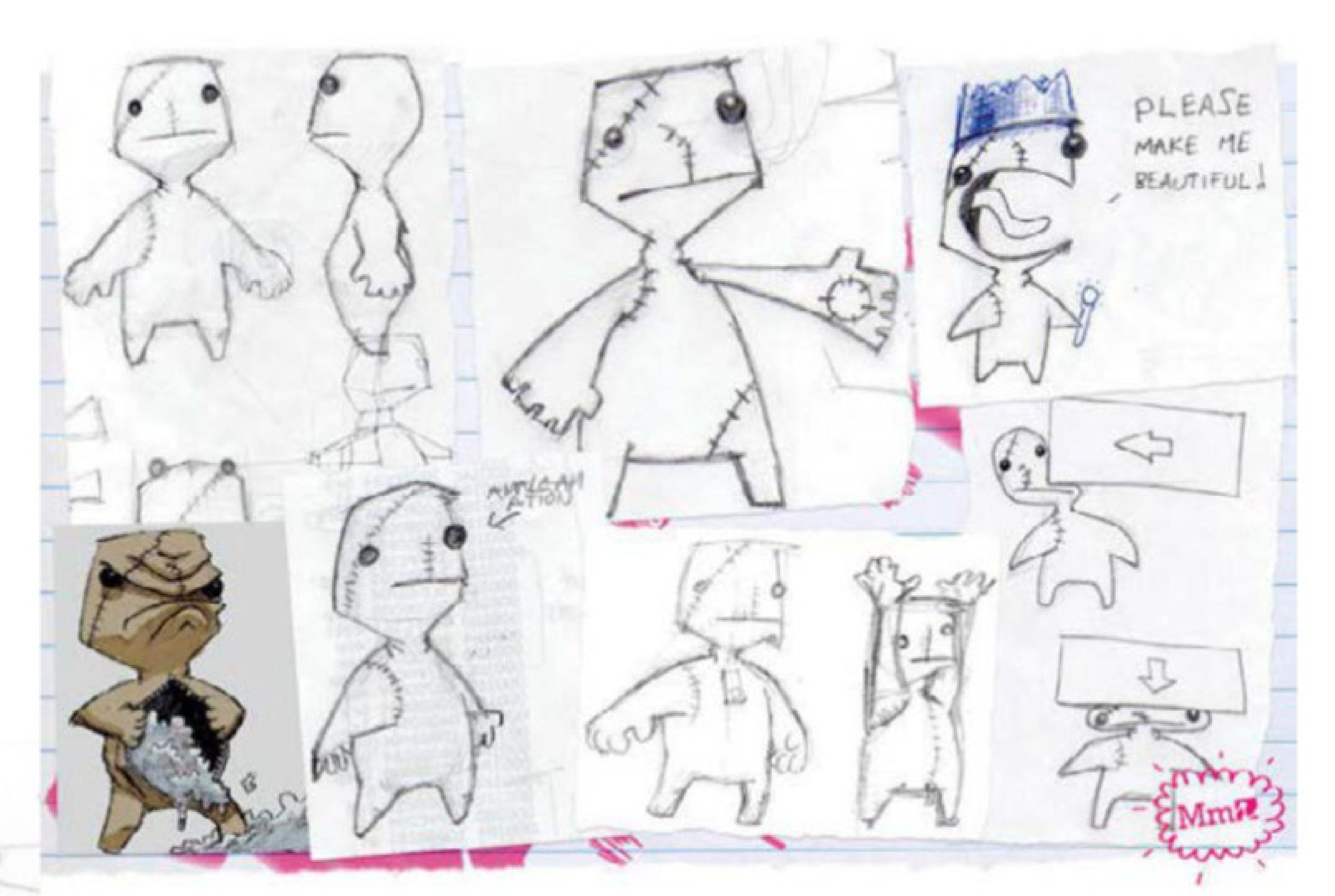
"A complex character that draws the player's empathy can make them iconic"





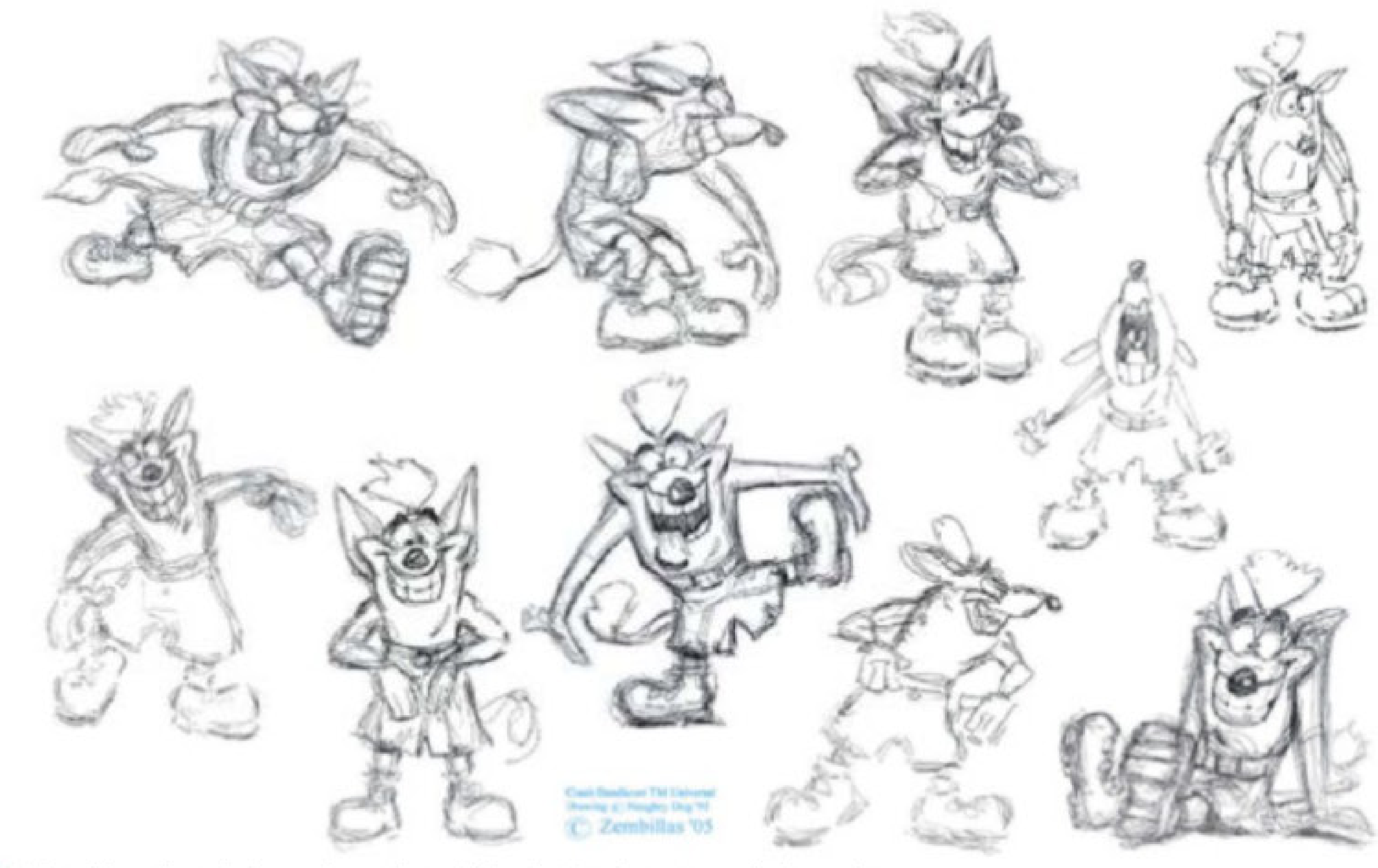






Sackboy initially looked… well, frightening, really. His cute little cheeky smile was more of a grimace.





He lost his tail and changed species – Willy the Wombat was rechristened as Crash Bandicoot by Charles Zembillas, the artist behind the 'coot.

something relevant and vital. When Crystal Dynamics took over the *Tomb Raider* brand back in 2006, it set about redesigning Lara Croft to take her away from the image that had been built up around her over the previous decade.

"We tried to respect what people love about Lara Croft," Rich Briggs, brand director at Crystal Dynamics said, "While also adding new gameplay and narrative elements to keep the franchise fresh. Ripley from *Alien* was one of the main character influences, because she had inner strength, mental fortitude, and the skill and will needed to survive. Keeping a balance of old and new was difficult at times."

But the studio didn't want to completely ignore what had made Croft iconic in the first place, even if her image had been sullied somewhat by a frankly ridiculous obsession with the character's place as an apparent pin-up model. "For me, Lara Croft's 1996 debut showcased an attitude and demeanour that I had never seen in a gaming character," Briggs told us, "Lara's confidence permeated every facet, from the way she spoke, to her swan dive, to her absolutely impeccable poise while dual-wielding pistols."

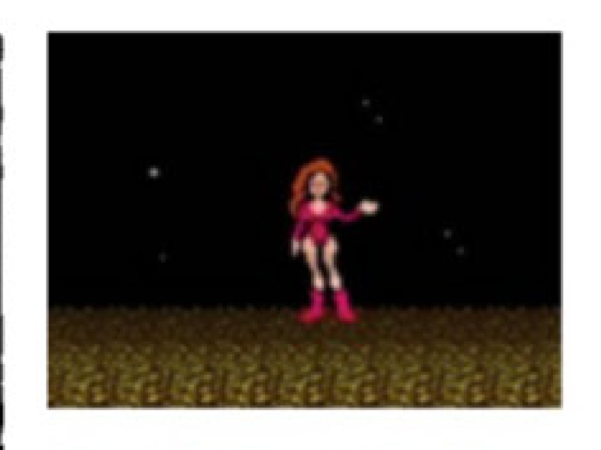
The subject of poise brings us to one question: how do you make a character identifiable in the way they carry themselves? If you can pick them out as a silhouette, you're on the right track. In fact, Sam Fisher from *Splinter Cell*'s very first design was just that – a man against a black background. Martin Caya, Fisher's original designer, told us the rather surprising origin tale: "The very first idea for Sam came in the form of a black silhouette against a black background with three glowing dots to suggest night vision goggles.

"That was even before I had thought about what his face would look like. Growing up, I had a bunch of G.I. Joe action figures and like most kids playing with them in the Eighties, Snake Eyes was *the* figure to have. He was the coolest G.I. Joe bar none. That character had such an impact on my childhood that looking back, that first image of the silhouette really was my personal spin on Snake Eyes."

Why go down that route? It's simple: "Instant visual recognition," Caya stated, "To this day, I still catch some flak regarding Sam's three green glowing dots. I understand that they make absolutely no sense in the real world. But in the game world, they helped the player identify where Sam was facing when in the shadows and frankly, I always thought it just looked cool. I always use Batman's silhouette as an example. That long cape with those pointy ears, when you see them, you know right away that it's the Batman. So when you see those three green glowing dots, you instantly know that it's Sam."

But Drake, Croft and Fisher are all recognisable as people. Why is it that we still find ourselves drawn to a fat, midget plumber and his lanky brother? A warrior in her gun-toting power-suit? An animal we literally didn't even know existed until it turned up on a game on the original PlayStation? These themes are constant across all fashions, all forms of design: an icon captures the hearts and minds of players.

"In general, I think gaming icons fall into two categories," Briggs told us, "First, there are characters from a game that defined a certain timeframe, or introduced a revolutionary experience. It's not necessarily about their specific traits, but rather how they as the lead character became a poster child. The second group of characters are icons because of their personality, their actions within the game, and »



PATRIARCHY 101

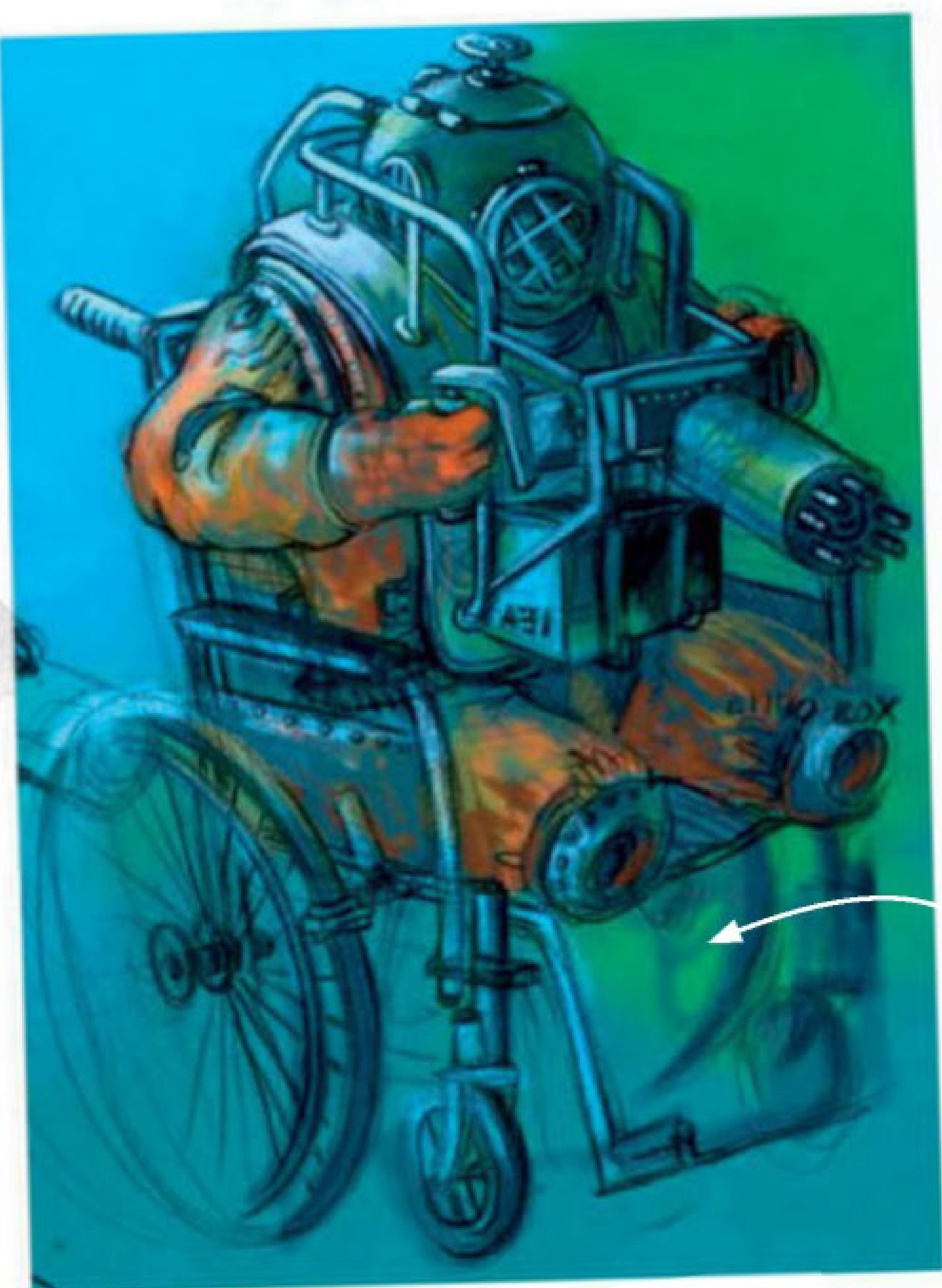
Few moments are more iconic – for icons – than that when Samus Aran, protagonist of the *Metroid* series, first removed her helmet and revealed to the world she was a woman. But, for some bizarre reason, an argument often raised online is that 'women can't be lead characters'. It's of little surprise that Rich Briggs refutes this claim: "A person may be of the opinion that they don't personally enjoy playing as a female character, which is fine," he said, "However, stating that a female character can't be a lead is like saying a woman can't be a lead singer, or the lead in a movie. It's not the fact that Lara is a woman that is important, it's how we portray her."



Early sketches for Cloud and Aerith of *Final Fantasy VII* were, as always, handled by Yoshitaka Amano, capturing the nature vs technology spirit of the game easily.

Making a Big Daddy







1

● WITH A GENERAL theme in place – that of the old-fashioned diving suit – the creative process means working with that as a jumping off point. Early designs include some interesting ideas, like the wheelchair-bound Daddy.

2

● AS THE PROCESS refines what is needed from the character, we begin to see more familiar features – and weapons – showing up. All of our (sometimes) gentle giants look familiar, but they're more like normal men than *BioShock* eventually gave us.

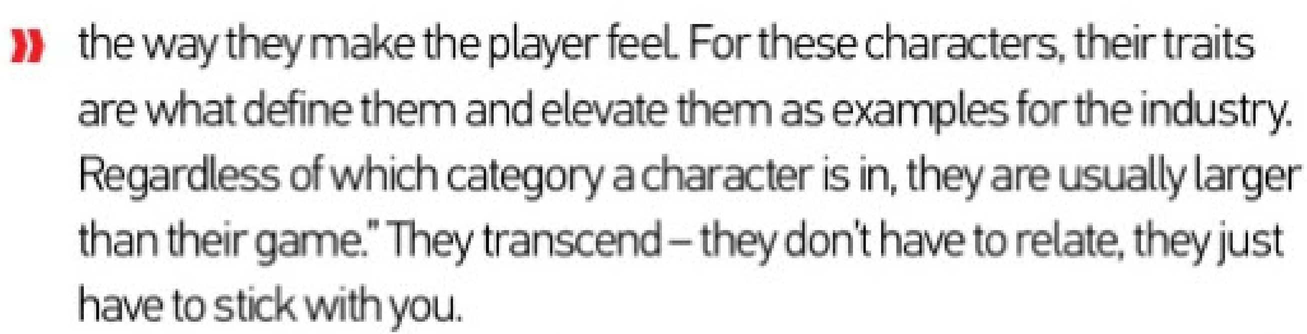
3

● AS THE DESIGN is iterated on again and again we begin to see very clear signs of the final plan, and revisions have fewer, smaller changes between each version. Barring his weapons, our little friend in the middle is pretty much the finished Big Daddy.

4

● AN EARLY RENDER of the finished version of *BioShock*'s guardian and caretaker. A clear development on the diving suits of old with enough tweaks and changes to make it otherworldly, threatening – and iconic.

All images from BioShock: Breaking the Mold



the way they make the player feel. For these characters, their traits are what define them and elevate them as examples for the industry. Regardless of which category a character is in, they are usually larger than their game." They transcend – they don't have to relate, they just have to stick with you.

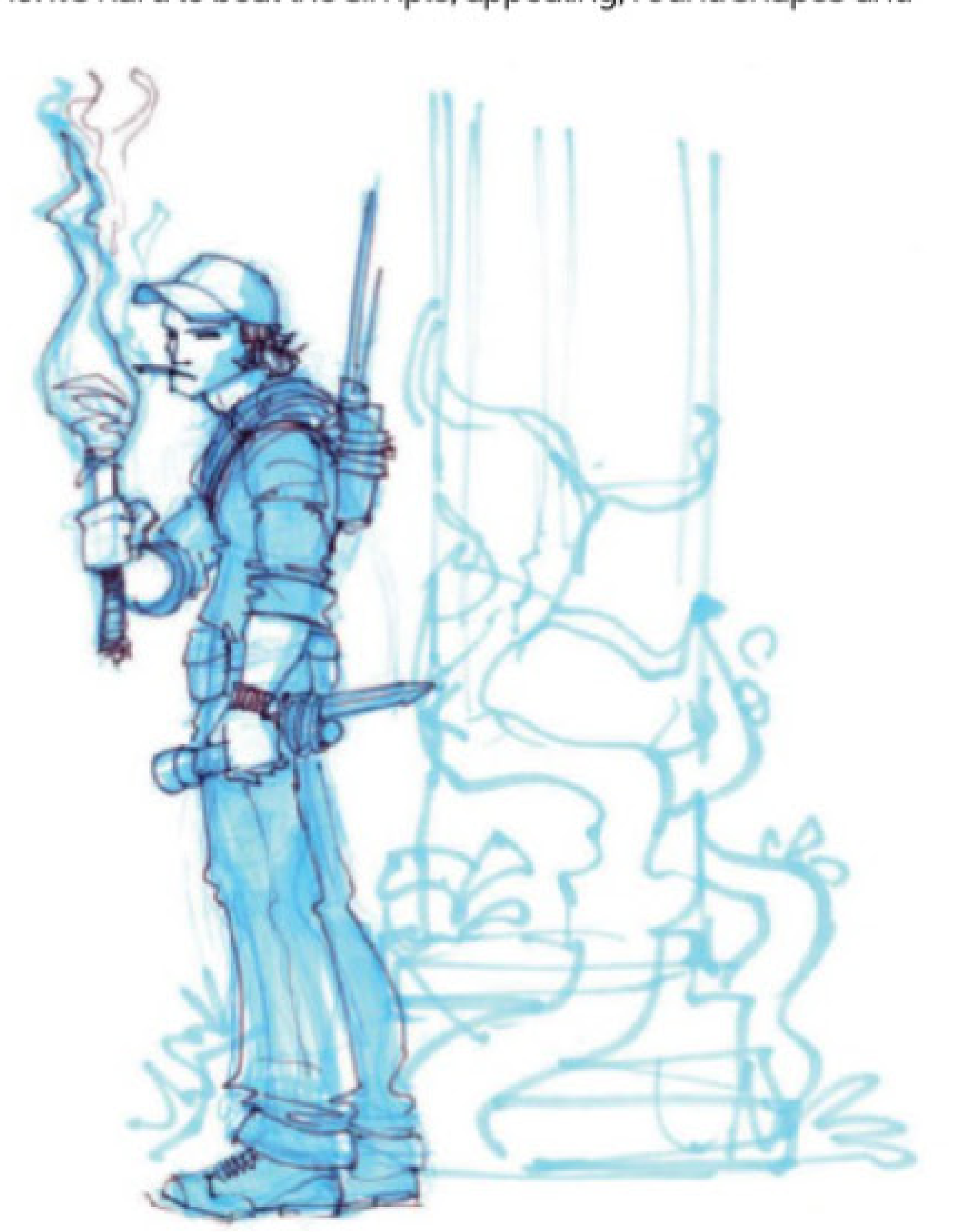
But Druckmann was quick to point out how things have changed over the years: "In the past it used to be based mostly on aesthetic design. Bold colours, graphic shapes. The character's abilities also played into making them iconic (Sonic is fast!). And while those things are still important, a complex character that draws the player's empathy can make them iconic. We now have to think of characters as more than just their aesthetics but also of who they are and what kind of choices they make."

Even with those considerations to make in modern gaming, when you ask someone who they consider the true gaming icons to be,

"It's hard to beat Mario's simple, appealing, round shapes and primary colour palette… And it doesn't hurt that he's in some of the best games of all time"

you get a fair few identical answers across the board. "The traditional favourites of Mario, Sonic, Link, Samus Aran, Simon Belmont, B.J. Blazkowicz, Master Chief, Solid Snake, and Gordon Freeman may seem like the easy and safe response," Briggs said, "But they definitely fit the criteria of defining a platform, establishing a hugely popular and long-running franchise, or creating/leading a genre. Most have done all three. I would absolutely include Lara Croft on the list because she has grown with and at times defined the industry. She ushered in new standards, challenged expectations, achieved global mainstream popularity, and is once again a highly relevant and respected heroine."

And while Druckmann's list was a lot shorter, his one choice from gaming's past was indeed a match: "Old school, I have to go with Mario. It's hard to beat the simple, appealing, round shapes and primary colour palette… And it doesn't hurt that he's in some of the best games of all time." But the icons come from newer titles too, as Druckmann points out: "A newer character that I find very iconic is Clementine from *The Walking Dead* games. Her hair and her hat have become her visual trademarks and her character is very complex, showing both strength and vulnerability."



If this design had been approved, our views on Nathan Drake would likely be very different to what they are.

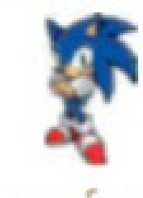
SIX OF GAMING'S GREATEST ICONS

PAC-MAN



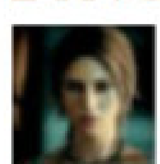
It's incredible that a pizza with a slice missing, dashing around a maze gobbling pills and ghosts can be an icon, but that's games for you. 34 years after he first burst onto the arcade scene, the little wakka-wakka-ing one is still going strong.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG



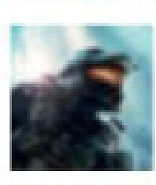
Poor Sonic – speak to a younger gamer these days and they'll be confused as to why you ever liked him. Back in the early Nineties he was brilliant – effortlessly cool and riddled with attitude, but these days he's a bit of a laughing stock.

LARA CROFT



If it hadn't been for Crystal Dynamics taking Lara away from original creators Core Design, she might not have made this list. Fortunately her career was revived, and many are eagerly awaiting her next adventure in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*.

MASTER CHIEF



Some would argue Master Chief is an empty vessel, not a real character to be celebrated – but the impact the lanky bionic one has had on millions of gamers can't be ignored. Chief is an inspiration to the Xbox generation, like it or not.

LINK



Is there a gaming icon so often called by the wrong name? We doubt it. Such is the curse of being the cover star of a game that doesn't actually have your name on it (bar a few exceptions). Still, it doesn't make us any less fond of Link, or of Zelda.

MARIO



He's been in almost every kind of game you could think of, barring a *GTA* clone. His face is one of the most instantly recognisable in all of culture, never mind just gaming. His face appears in graffiti in countries that don't even know what Nintendo is.

Icons may come in all shapes and sizes, but it's apparent we're in a post-mascot era, with only Mario standing tall – the legend among pretenders, the unbesmirched reputation despite his appearance in anything that will pay him a few pounds for his likeness. Sonic is a shadow of his former self, and the less said about Shadow the better. Crash Bandicoot was swallowed whole by an uncaring array of greedy publisher decisions. Master Chief still bridges that gap between mascot and icon, though really he does sit firmly in the latter camp. Ditto Nathan Drake, a man who's just a bloke.

And that's what feeds into it these days – when games decided to 'grow up', they rather immaturely decided this meant we had to abandon the bright colours and big eyes; that the way forward for our first stop in the representation of What Games Are had to be an angry, generic man with a gun. But it doesn't have to be like this. We're still allowed to like cute mascots, we're still capable of appreciating a non-human protagonist, we're still able to enjoy a character who *doesn't* actually shoot things.

Take Mike Bithell's superb *Thomas Was Alone* – a game that makes you care about a bunch of faceless, expressionless shapes. *Minecraft*'s blocky heroes and villains are so popular you're hard pressed to find a toy store that doesn't carry some form of figure from the game. Then in the wider world of film we have the universally-loved Wall-E, showing that the cutesy, big-eyed Little Engine That Could is a design that always appeals – though ironically fobbed off in the traditional tie-in title when it came to his representation in gaming. The appetite for creative diversity is there – and it shows there's room for the Drakes, Chiefs, Fishers and anonymous army men icons *alongside* the mascot-types which hark back to a time of Disney-aping, big-eyed cartoon characters.

Some appear to understand this. Nintendo has built a reputation on exactly this, especially when it comes to the best-of-all-worlds dust ups in *Smash Bros*. Where else would you see Solid Snake, poster child for the post-mascot era, getting thwacked out of an arena by a big pink blob known as Kirby? People *love* it. And Nintendo knows. Though admittedly it's also something of a rest home for forgotten icons and the mascots who lacked staying power.

With all that said, creating an icon isn't something for one game; it isn't even something for a whole series, franchise or collection of spin-offs. An icon is someone – or some*thing* – that resonates with players long after they're done taking down terrorists or finding out the princess is in another castle. It isn't a marketing ploy, it isn't a cynical attempt to cash-in on other, successful characters – the icon is the character that endures and, ultimately, becomes the face not just of its games, but of gaming as a whole.


Mario, Sonic, Lara Croft, Solid Snake, Nathan Drake, Master Chief, Crash Bandicoot, Gordon Freeman, Cloud Strife, Samus Aran, Link, Zelda – they've all been the recognisable face of gaming at some point or another. Some still are. But as we move further into the world of homogenised design, of games made by committee and focus-tested to within an inch of their lives, will we see these focal points of gaming joy become extinct?

Let's hope not. We know someone is out there designing the next Mario, and we hope the gaming world welcomes them with open arms. The world needs more joy, more primary colours, more blue skies and fewer morose white men with guns. The world of gaming needs to return to its icons, and not carry on down this route towards average Joes and Janes, or we'll all be worse off.



“It was liberating but incredibly punishing”

STEVEN TER HEIDE, GAME DIRECTOR, GUERRILLA GAMES



WHY I ❤...

Elite

STEVEN TER HEIDE, GAME DIRECTOR, GUERRILLA GAMES

The game that really did it for me was Elite. *The first one on the Commodore 64 was an experience that, for the first time, you could completely lose yourself in. In my head it was the first open-world game. It was liberating but incredibly punishing – you finally had all the cargo you needed and then you'd hit the massive runway during docking and explode. I'd have my Commodore on for days on end because save games didn't really work back then. That is probably one of the things that got me into games and taught me a lot about how games lived in your head. The stories you have in [your head] are much more fun than the stories that you have on the screen because you make it about so much more. I dreamt up whole stories of how I invaded things and that's what really got me into gaming.*

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THE WOLF AMONG US: SEASON ONE

Does Telltale Games' follow-up to The Walking Dead deliver another compelling yarn?



THE AVERAGE

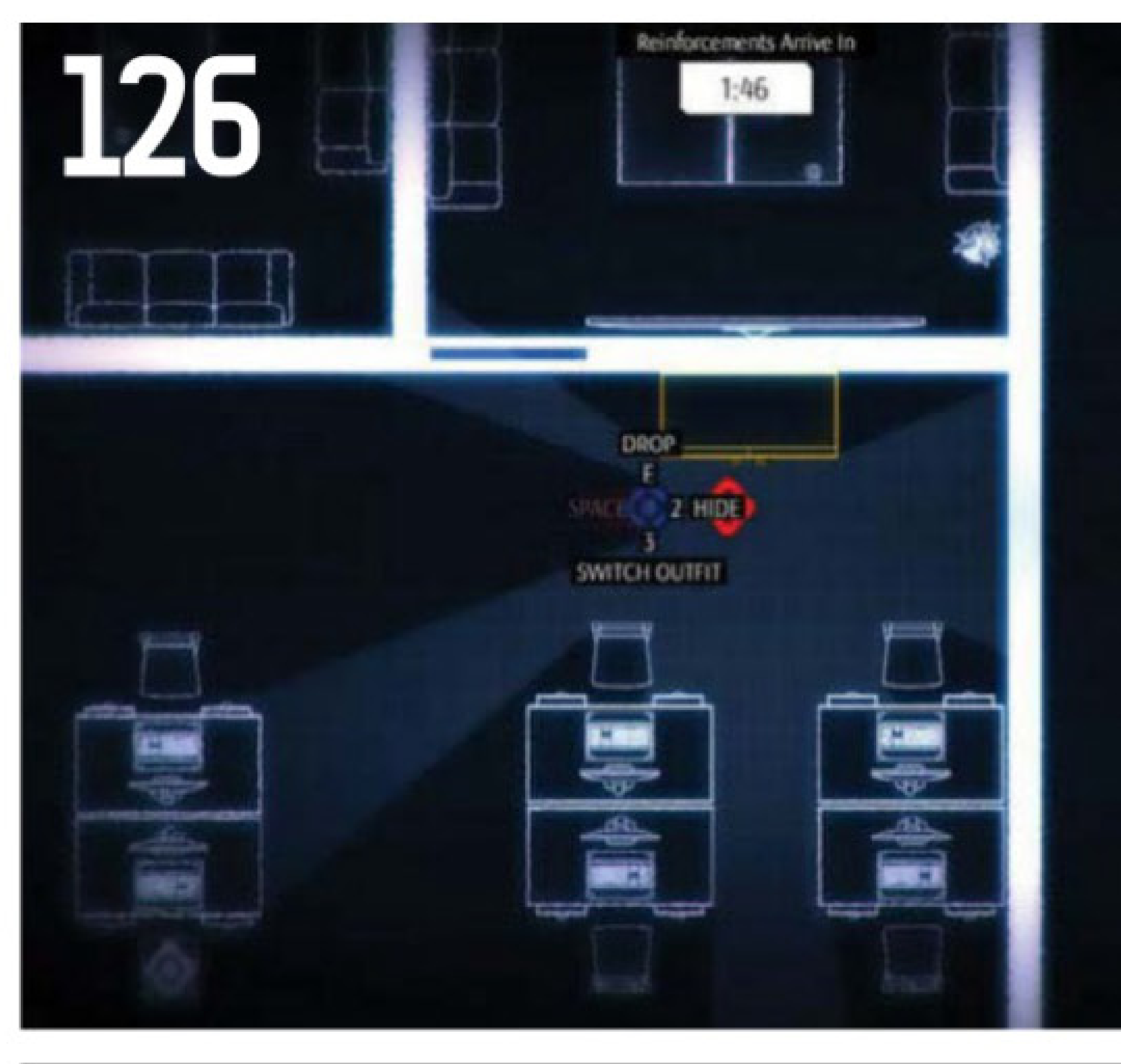
Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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ALL QUIET? NOT EVEN NEARLY

Company Of Heroes 2: The Western Front Armies

"War is nothing more than a way for companies to make money," comes the bark of a cynical US Forces rifleman just minutes after arriving on the battlefield. To his credit, videogames' relatively short history is littered with numerous examples that suggest this disillusioned soldier might have a point.

Happily though, Relic Entertainment's first standalone expansion for last year's solid World War II RTS, *Company Of Heroes 2*, is no such cash-in. Sure, the *Western Front Armies* add-on can be described as a map and factions pack but it also amounts to a whole lot more. It's good value for money, for a start, but it could also mark a potential shift in focus for the Canadian developer and stand as a well-received experiment by publisher Sega.

For those that own *Company Of Heroes 2*, this standalone expansion introduces the US Forces and German Oberkommando West factions for online multiplayer battles. These forces share similar qualities to the Allied and Axis factions of the original *Company Of Heroes* and sit alongside the Soviet and Wehrmacht armies of its sequel. There are also an additional eight multiplayer maps to add to the base game's 23, in addition to the community-created efforts.

However, *The Western Front Armies'* standalone nature also positions it as a more affordable entry point to the series, and by dispensing with single-player content (bar one-off skirmishes against the AI), it's free to focus on the purest form of RTS experience: its multiplayer battles, which range from one-versus-one up to four-versus-four. In doing so, it distances itself from the criticism that *Company Of Heroes 2*'s core narrative attracted for the manner in which it clumsily attempted to portray the raw, survivalist mentality of the Soviet troops. It turns out that this is no bad thing, for while the campaign had its high points it was rarely able to match the dynamic scenarios thrown up by each foray into multiplayer.

What the core game got right and *The Western Front Armies* successfully emulates is the positive manner in which the armies' characteristics inform the way that you play them. Just as you'd draft conscripts as the Soviet army, plugging holes to buy time to shore up your defences, here the US Forces versatility is pitted against the technical superiority of their German counterparts; one a fluid, dynamic force, the other a slower but more powerful proposition. Personal play-style will dictate which will become your favourite, but both offer something new and, crucially, something that feels well balanced when pitted against the other forces.

DETAILS
- **FORMAT:** PC
- **ORIGIN:** Canada
- **PUBLISHER:** Sega
- **DEVELOPER:** Relic Entertainment
- **PRICE:** £14.99 (or £9.99/faction)
- **RELEASE:** Out now
- **PLAYERS:** 1-8
- **MINIMUM SPEC:** 2GB RAM, 2Ghz Intel Core2 Duo or equivalent, 512MB Direct3D 10 video card, 30GB HDD space
- **ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes



Below: The new commander powers complement the new armies, further empowering the US Forces infantry or providing the Oberkommando West with an effective, well-balanced means of countering their early advantage.

A WEIGHTY, NARRATIVE-DRIVEN SINGLE-PLAYER EXPERIENCE ISN'T STRICTLY NECESSARY FOR A GAME SUCH AS COMPANY OF HEROES TO PROSPER

The US Forces are all about high mobility, versatility and adaptability, with the option for riflemen to equip new weapons researched via the weapon racks at the heavily fortified starting base. These help aid either your forward momentum or your reactions to what your opponent is doing. A range of lightweight, relatively cheap early-game vehicles allow you to harry the opposition, exposing poorly defended links in the supply chain to score an early advantage and build up to the heavier armour, unlocked through fielding Lieutenant, Captain and Major infantry units.

The German Oberkommando sports mobility of its own, albeit in the form of heavier mobile supply trucks, which can be moved around the battlefield to provide makeshift bases. These trucks hunker down to provide valuable cover and a place from which to kick on, creating footholds along the way as you secure supply points to build to the more expensive but technically superior armour units.

Both armies have the potential to devastate, but there's a more immediate thrill to be had from leading the brash US Forces on a daring raid of a well-defended Oberkommando choke point, especially in co-op games where you can leave the reinforcement of positions to a more defence-minded partner. A host of new commander abilities further bolster the inherent skills of both armies or enable you pitch a curve ball by supplementing the weaker side of each to create a more rounded fighting force.

BETTER THAN

TROPICO 5





CIVILIZATION V

WORSE THAN

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

As a new player to *Company Of Heroes 2, The Western Front Armies* provides access to the US Forces and Oberkommando West factions. These can be used in online multiplayer matches with up to seven other AI and human players, while it's also possible to play against owners of the *Company Of Heroes 2* base game via the automatch option. There are also eight *Western Front*-specific maps that can be selected for use in custom games in addition to the 23 *COH2* maps, which are again accessed via the automatch option. The potential gameplay hours gleaned from the initial investment of £14.99 makes *The Western Front Armies* an excellent value-for-money proposition.

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Entirely up to you. This multiplayer-focused slice of gameplay could provide dozens of hours of play.

Q. ARE THEY NEW ARMIES?
Yes. While they share similarities with the factions from the original *Company Of Heroes*, they've been updated to fit with the sequel.

Q. WHAT'S THE BEST UNIT?
It's completely subjective, but the adaptability and versatility of the US Forces riflemen means you can easily get attached to them.

Left: Parachuting in support forces is all well and good but without medium armour to back them up they risk being torn to shreds as soon as they touch the ground.

Above: Attempting to overwhelm the opposition with sheer force of numbers is a risky, somewhat amateurish manoeuvre; a few well placed anti-tank and anti-infantry units will hold their own against the enemy.

As is often the case with complex strategy titles – and as was the case with the core game – there's an issue with how some of this information is presented to you across various HUD elements, tabs and flashing icons. Veterans will quickly understand how best to leverage the respective abilities of each of the new factions but brand new players can expect a degree of trial and error as the tutorial offers little more than an overview of the basics. Fortunately, there's the option to play with and against the AI, which helps hone your skills and master the strategies required to head online in earnest, but it would have been nice to see an extensive tutorial mode aimed at empowering the new players that Relic and Sega hope to embolden to take part in what can often seem like a bewildering genre.

Ultimately, *The Western Front Armies* standalone expansion feels like an experiment to test the appetite for future multiplayer-versus-single-player RTS content. In this respect, it succeeds in highlighting that a weighty, narrative-driven single-player experience isn't strictly necessary for a game such as *Company Of Heroes* to prosper. While more varied victory conditions beyond capture points and annihilation would be welcome, you soon forget that there is no over-arching story as you're busy writing stories of your own.

As a map and factions pack, *The Western Front Armies* brings quality offerings of both, but perhaps more importantly for the longer term health of the franchise it'll also bring with it an influx of new players. It may lack an ambitious single-player campaign but this value for money proposition serves to highlight that sometimes less really can be more.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BACK TO SCHOOL: A better realised tutorial for this standalone slice of *Company Of Heroes 2* would be beneficial, lest those valuable new players get spooked by the depth of the content.

VERDICT 7/10
SMALL BUT WELL-FORMED



Above: The bases of the two opposing forces are as diametrically opposed as their approaches to combat; the US Forces stream forth from a well-established and fortified base whereas the Oberkommando West favour a more mobile approach with deployable half-tracks.



Above: It might be because of the reused *Fall Of Cybertron* assets, or just a lack of time, but *Rise Of The Dark Spark*'s environments look bland, the *Transformers* washed out. It's a lesson in how to make such a cool property look mundane.

WHO CARES IF CYBERTRON DIES, WHAT ABOUT OUR PATIENCE?

Transformers: Rise Of The Dark Spark

It's impossible to understate just how much of a colossal disappointment *Transformers: Rise Of The Dark Spark* truly is. When it comes to what we've grown up with – watching the show, breaking the toy and buying the T-shirt – we're admittedly easy to please. If you think about it, a *Transformers* game should only need to deliver on two promises: make it fun to smash robots with other robots, and make it awesome to transform into a variety vehicles. *Rise Of The Dark Spark* falls short on both counts, not only failing to capture the magic of the franchise, but managing to showcase game design at its most mediocre.

Rise Of The Dark Spark is admittedly frustrating for a number of reasons, but it's truly perplexing the way publisher Activision has handled development. Edge Of Reality has been handed the reigns and has successfully ruined a good thing, squandered the good work High Moon Studios did with the series on the surprisingly entertaining *Transformers: War For Cybertron* and *Fall Of Cybertron* games.

They were two releases that revealed a studio with a strong grasp on what made the IP exciting to begin with. To make matters worse, there's a very real chance *Rise Of The Dark Spark* began as another instalment in the *Cybertron* series before being coerced into becoming a movie-tie in. Edge Of Reality not only makes liberal use of art assets and textures from 2010's *Fall Of Cybertron*, it even makes a desperate attempt to unite the two disparate *Cybertron* and Michael Bay-verse storylines. The Autobots and Decepticons do battle over the mysterious Dark Spark: a device that allows the developer to throw in every inane plot twist it can pull out of thin air without explanation. The crossover fails to come together, as two sections starring the movie characters bookend a confusing and lengthy flashback to explain the Dark Spark's origins back on the Transformers' home planet. It falls expectedly flat, and only adds to the problems that pervade every other facet of design.

Rise Of The Dark Spark is a hot mess of poor level design, unintuitive combat systems, terrible checkpoints and an outright laughable presentation. In truth, Edge Of Reality's effort only makes us appreciate the *Cybertron* games even more. The developer's attempt to recreate High Moon's successes is disastrous, unless your idea of a good time is

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Edge Of Reality
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

RISE OF THE DARK SPARK COMMITS MORE THAN ITS FAIR SHARE OF SINS AGAINST COMPETENT GAME DESIGN

FAQs

Q. IS IT REALLY THAT BAD?

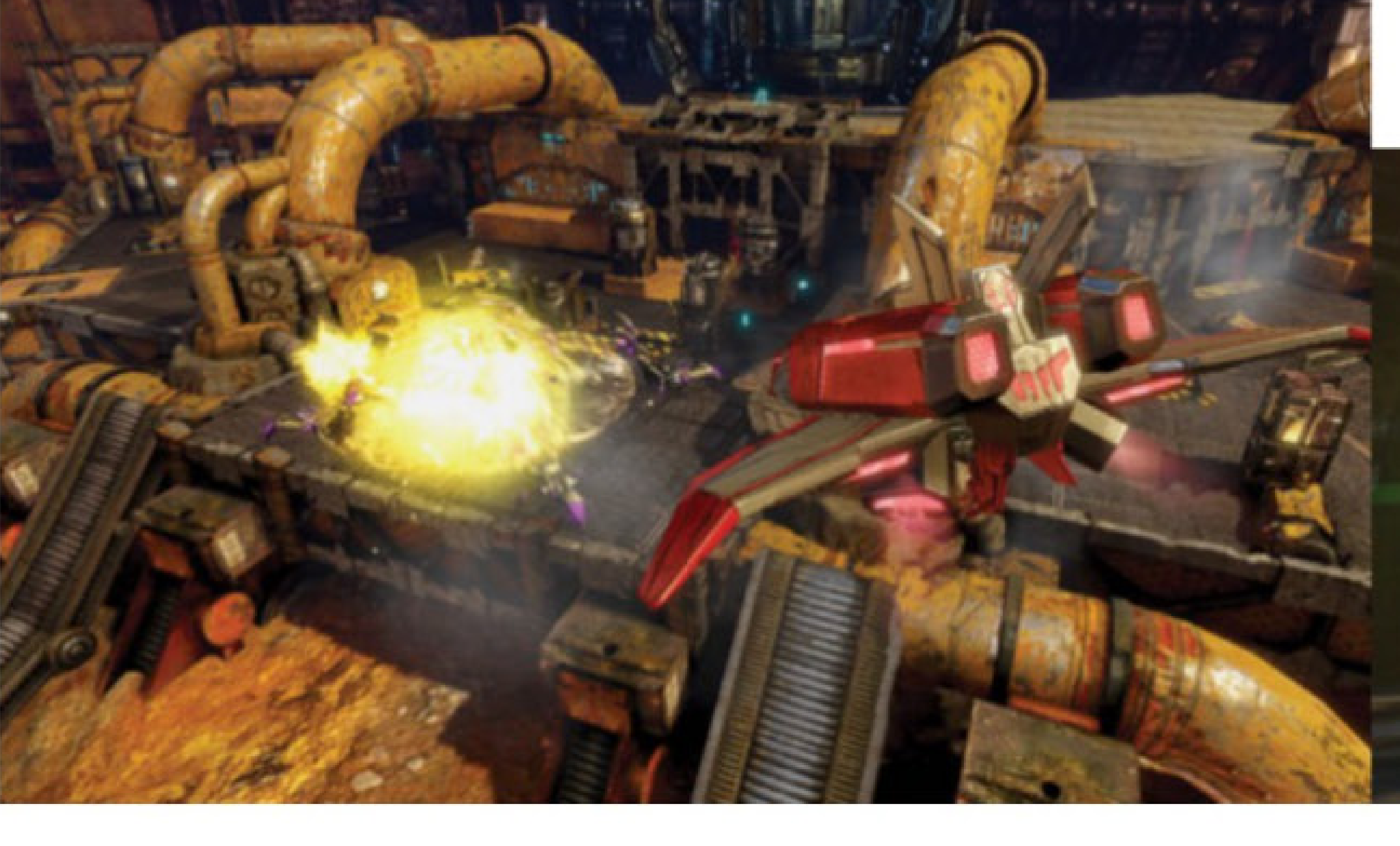
Seriously, *Rise Of The Dark Spark* fails to capture the energy or action of the *Transformers* franchise. It's a borderline broken game.

Q. HOW'S IT LOOK?

It might just be the worst looking next-gen game from a major publisher. It's a lesson in how to make awesome transforming robots mundane.

Q. FAN SERVICE?

If you're hellbent on buying this then, yes, there's a fairly substantial amount of character skins and Transformers waiting to be unlocked.



Below: This isn't the worst *Transformers* game to ever release, but considering how strong the *War Of Cybertron* games were, it's certainly one of the most disappointing.

Right: *Rise Of The Dark Spark* will have you fighting off waves of enemies; sadly the enemy AI is entirely unsatisfying.

Below: The co-operative Escalation mode is fun, but it's not enough to make this disappointing package even slightly palatable.



an unintuitive wave-based shooter that's as mundane as it is unsatisfying.

It's a shame, because the 20 guns at your disposal are impressive enough. Each has a distinct purpose and style, from your standard machineguns and shotguns, to more futuristic weapons of mass destruction like an electric beam rifle that chains between enemies and a cannon that fires off *Dead Space*-style ricocheting energy blades. Sadly, an interesting arsenal isn't anything without something interesting to get in your sights, and *Rise Of The Dark Spark*'s AI is among the worst to arrive on PlayStation 4.

You'll never have to employ tactics to progress, just shoot until the last piece of scrap metal hits the floor. Some enemies will stand stupidly in the open, while others will perform ridiculous evasive manoeuvres that send you on wild chases across bland, lifeless environments. What's doubly frustrating is how wild the difficulty spikes can be. One minute you'll be crushing everything in sight, the next minute a wave of enemies will ride into battle so thickly that you'll be left staring at a lengthy loading screen.

This is especially frustrating when you consider how poor the checkpoint system in *Rise Of The Dark Spark* is. The repetitive dialogue, sluggish frame-rate and boring combat quickly starts to grate as you are forced to replay large sections of a chapter. All because Edge Of Reality didn't think it would be wise to place a checkpoint before a flying boss that can inexplicably shoot you from an area that's entirely inaccessible to you.

Rise Of The Dark Spark commits more than its fair share of sins against competent game design, not to mention the *Transformers* franchise, but the worst and most unforgivable has to be the way vehicular transformations have been handled. If you're unlucky enough to be playing as an Autobot with the capacity to transform into a car, expect to find stiff handling, dire shooting mechanics and a pitiful sense of speed.

While it does feature a fairly robust, albeit unnecessary, weapon upgrade system, the progression system is unintuitive. Being rewarded for completing challenges is all well and good, but receiving a Gear Box feels like a punishment. You'll have to wade through screen after screen looking at your rewards individually; it can honestly feel like you're spending a lifetime in the pause menu. Then again, anything that distracts from the single-player campaign can't be all bad.

Just like the online co-operative Escalation mode then, we suppose. It's the only entertainment to be had from this otherwise soul-crushing package. You and three teammates are thrown into one of eight well-designed arenas in an effort to see off 15 waves of increasingly difficult enemies. While Escalation doesn't have the fantastic boss-encounters of *Gears Of War*'s Horde mode, or the sense of escalation of *Halo*'s Firefight, it does have an excellent sense of urgency and pacing that the main campaign is so laughably devoid of.

Rise Of The Dark Spark feels rushed: a mess of half-baked ideas and sloppy execution that's put *Transformers* on the same track as the *Spider-Man* games, approaching the point of no return. We can't be certain as to why Activision seems so intent with steering these wonderful properties so deeply into the dirt, but we hope it realises the value in the brands before it's too late. Passable co-operative mode aside, there's very little to recommend out of *Rise Of The Dark Spark*.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EVERYTHING: Activision needs to take the *Transformers* games back to the drawing board; something has to change.

WHAT HAPPENED ON CYBERTRON?

Inexplicably, you'll spend most of the game with an Autobot or Decepticon by your side – but the game never introduces co-operative play back into the mix. Even the most mundane of games can be better with friends, and sadly *Rise Of The Dark Spark* leaves us paired with AI controlled allies that are as stupid as the enemy. Be prepared to regularly fight your way into the middle of maps with foes shooting you from all sides, just because Starscream thought it would be wise to charge straight into a fight. Megatron won't be happy to hear about this.







A SHRINKING VIOLET

Sacred 3

The problem with streamlining is that it's difficult to hit the sweet spot where less is more and to not overshoot to the point at which less is just… less. *Sacred 3* is a lean, fast-paced and visually splendid action-RPG that has made a few too many cut backs when compared to the likes of genre stalwarts *Diablo*, *Dungeon Siege* and *Titan Quest*. This has involved boiling down the genre's core mechanics, further refining the series' own experimentation with traditional RPG leanings and stripping back the explorative backbone of its forbears. Unfortunately, Keen Games has taken this to the point that *Sacred 3* is now more style than substance.

That's not to say that it doesn't manage to be fun. With a couple of friends, this hack-and-slash action RPG can be a hoot and that's particularly true if you have a buddy alongside you for some local co-op play. However, without the distraction of friendly rivalry that the game's scoring system promotes, the lack of variety across level structure and mission objectives is all too readily apparent. It's a shame, particularly because it appears less due to a lack of ability on Keen and Deep Silver's part, and more due to a deliberate lack of ambition.

Take character design, for example. While a choice of six-plus character classes has long been the accepted standard for games such as *Sacred 3*, here you only get four: the divine Seraphim, hulking Safiri, lithe Ancarian and bow-wielding Khukuhru. There's is a fifth, the elemental Malakhim, but he's reserved as a pre-order bonus and forms part of an ominous DLC-shaped shadow that looms large over proceedings (see Money Talks).

Standard physical attacks are confined to a single button press and constant mashing results in a pre-defined three-hit combo; there's also a bash button to break armoured foes' defences and disarm traps. Each character has access to Combat Arts, light and heavy energy-based attacks that typically fall into the direct damage or area of effect categories and can be bolstered by way of a short and unimaginative upgrade path, but a number of hero abilities have comparable analogues in other characters' skill sets.

There's no discernible difference in a character's underlying base stats, either. As such, there's no incentive to take on roles within your group as you wade among the impressive number of enemies that crowd the

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, 360
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Keen Games
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 local (1-4 online)
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows Vista SP2 / 7 / 8, Processor: Intel Pentium D945 (Dual Core 3400 MHz)/ AMD Athlon 64 X2 6000+ (Dual Core 3000 MHz), Memory: 2 GB RAM, Graphics: Nvidia GeForce GT 610 (1024MB) / ATI Radeon 4770 (512MB), DirectX: Version 9.0c, Hard Drive: 25 GB available space, Sound Card: DirectX 9.0c-compatible
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: The majority of loot comes from completing levels rather than prising it from the hands of your enemies, and even the largest of treasure chests yield only gold. Below: The ability to re-spec abilities and weapon spirits provides enough variety to keep you experimenting, while switching between solo and multiplayer renders a number of previously redundant options viable.

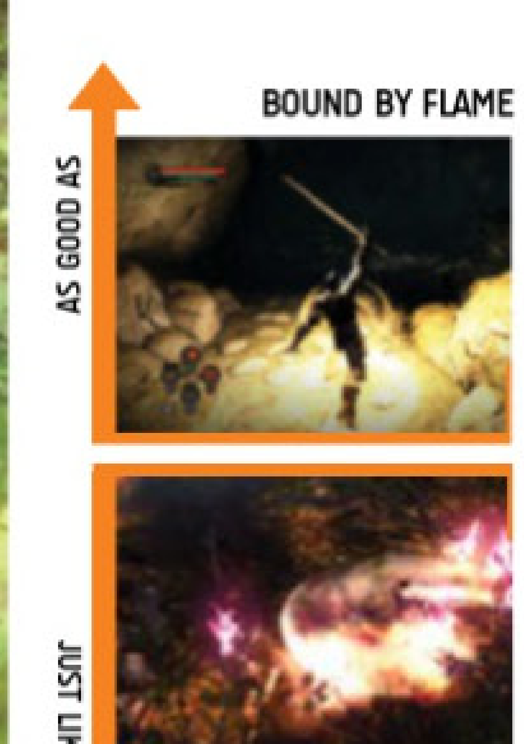


MONEY TALKS

Deep Silver and Keen Games' DLC plans for *Sacred 3* are plain to see. Two portals exist on the world map, waiting to transport you to new areas to thwart the designs of additional foes after main antagonist Zane has been slain. However, attempting to enter either portal transports you only as far as the game's store page, so you can stump up the necessary cash to continue your adventure. There's also the fifth character class, Malakhim, who is currently available as a pre-order bonus but will likely soon feature as DLC. The main campaign's 15-hour run time seems reasonable until you consider the sheer raft of content included as standard in *Sacred 1* and *2*, and the dozens of hours of play that genre behemoth *Diablo* offers up straight out of the box.



AS GOOD AS — BOUND BY FLAME



JUST LIKE — DUNGEON SIEGE 3

FAQs

Q. WORTH PLAYING SOLO?
Just about. The short levels manage to maintain interest despite the repetitive mechanics.

Q. WHAT CAN I CUSTOMISE?
Not much. There's only a small selection of Combat Arts, weapons and weapon spirits to choose between; character stats are invisible.

Q. CAN I BUTTON-MASH?
To an extent, yes, but some enemies require basic strategy to overcome and playing co-op sees you trying hard to out-score your team-mates.

screen. This is particularly noticeable when playing solo, as you'll be swarmed by the same minions, employ the same tactics to deal death, and watch them explode in the same pleasing mess of numbers, Critical Hit messages and pretty lighting effects.

However, it's clear that this is not a game designed to be played solo. From the number of abilities and skills that are geared towards buffing your party to the manner in which all of the NPCs and voice-over tracks refer to you as a plural, this was clearly envisaged as a party game. It also points to the fact that, at one time, *Sacred 3* was expected to feature AI companions to fill any gaps in the four-player line-up but that appears to have been deemed too ambitious and has since fallen by the wayside. Played in the spirit of a competitive co-op game and competing for score rather than peering too closely at the paper-thin narrative, its limited scope works.

It's not entirely mindless, though, as picking from the limited number of skills and weapons and imbuing them with various status effects at least offers the appearance of choice and the animations for different attacks remain identifiable among the hubbub of dozens of on-screen enemies. It's here, in the thick of it, that *Sacred 3* is at its strongest and most entertaining but it can eventually wear across the 15-hour duration and by the time you reach the end you rather feel like you're dialling it in. Enemies' attacks are so clearly telegraphed that even a final boss can be defeated using a variation of attack, dodge, Combat Art, repeat.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

IDENTITY CRISIS: Having just four characters to choose from wouldn't feel quite so restrictive if they at least played significantly differently to one another. Unfortunately, they're not unique enough to justify multiple play-throughs.

This lack of challenge becomes particularly apparent if you return to earlier optional levels later on, where you are massively overpowered and the rewards are slim pickings. Each area of the map remains constant and is broken up into discreet levels, accessed through a lobby area with main quests coming in at around 15-20 minutes and side quests are compressed into wave-based arenas or "kill everything" jaunts from point A to B. These introduce their own idyllic settings

SACRED 3 IS AT ITS STRONGEST IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE BUT THE REPETITIVE DESIGN EVENTUALLY WEARS ACROSS ITS 15-HOUR DURATION



Above: Mission variety is sparse and repeated often. At least the locales vary in nature; from windswept beaches to the darkest dungeon, Keen Games has ensured your eyes stay engaged long after your mind has wandered. **Left:** Streamlined controls are a comfortable fit for both controller and keyboard & mouse combinations, which makes playing with a sofa-buddy a cinch.

in which to purge bad guys but by removing the majority of loot drops from enemies and treasure chests and instead attaching them to the completion of story levels, you're robbed of one of the genre's key appeals: loot collection.

Lacklustre and repetitive objectives aside, *Sacred 3* doesn't really do too much wrong. Its stable frame-rate, lack of bugs and overall accessibility make it a painless experience and what it does, it does with gusto. It's fun, it just could have been so much more and in attempting to appeal to as broad a crowd as possible across PC and console, it has made the familiar mistake of oversimplifying to the detriment of challenge and reward.

Considering the scope of its predecessors and how far the genre has come since the series' inception a decade ago, that's as unnecessary as it is unwelcome. Still, there's potential here and approached with the right mindset and a group of friends there's some fun to be had. Streamline your expectations, in other words, and you're more likely to view *Sacred 3* as slick rather than shallow.



TOO STREAMLINED FOR ITS OWN GOOD



Above: The visuals are all over the place: with flat, buggy textures adding to the dirge presentation.

AT WAR WITH ITSELF

Enemy Front

With a hearty development period and a legitimately enthusiastic developer behind it, *Enemy Front* should have – to an extent at least – succeeded. It has stumbled knowingly into an overcrowded and stagnating genre, and one that would have benefitted from an injection of new ideas, especially from a rank outsider like City Interactive. However, what CI Games has actually created very much suffers at the hands of old ideas instead.

It's regrettable; in a lot of ways it functions as a serviceable first-person shooter, albeit one with a long line of far more successful predecessors. The shooting mechanics themselves aren't the best we've ever experienced, but they aren't the worst either. At times we found ourselves struggling to ascertain whether we were hitting what we were shooting at – on occasion the hit marker that is supposed to appear when successfully shooting an enemy neglected to show its face – but for the most part the weapons handle as they should, if lacking in weight a little.

Still, reasonably satisfactory FPS mechanics only get *Enemy Front* so far, as the majority of other elements are in a genuine state of turmoil. There are just so many strange things at work behind the scenes that make this game nothing short of a mess. The plot is as good a place to start as any, and here it is quite preposterous, even by FPS standards. It instantly gives you pause for thought when a Polish-made WWII game that is mostly set in Warsaw revolves around the tale of a morally ambiguous American journalist. Narrative is rarely the bread and butter of the genre, but the whole of *Enemy Front* plays out so loosely and incoherently that its writing deficiencies become impossible to ignore.

No one buys *Battlefield* for its plot. No one buys *Call Of Duty* for its plot, either. It's unlikely that anyone will buy *Enemy Front* with expectations of a strong, astute narrative stream; what they *will* be expecting is a fresh take on the genre. This just isn't it, unfortunately. To judge *Enemy Front* as a sum of its parts reveals it to be an FPS fraud – a pretender to the throne that entirely relies on tropes found in other franchises to make it stand out.

For one, present and correct is the gung-ho *Call Of Duty* outlook in the later stages that detracts horribly from *Enemy Front*'s

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: City Interactive
DEVELOPER: CI Games
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-12 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

TO JUDGE ENEMY FRONT AS A SUM OF ITS PARTS REVEALS IT TO BE AN FPS FRAUD – A PRETENDER

FAQs

Q. ARE THERE COLLECTIBLES?

What a silly question – this is 2014, of course there are. They're utterly pointless, mind, unless you're hunting Achievements.

Q. IS IT HISTORICALLY ACCURATE?

Locations and atmosphere are, for the most part, accurate. However, the main storyline is utter tosh.

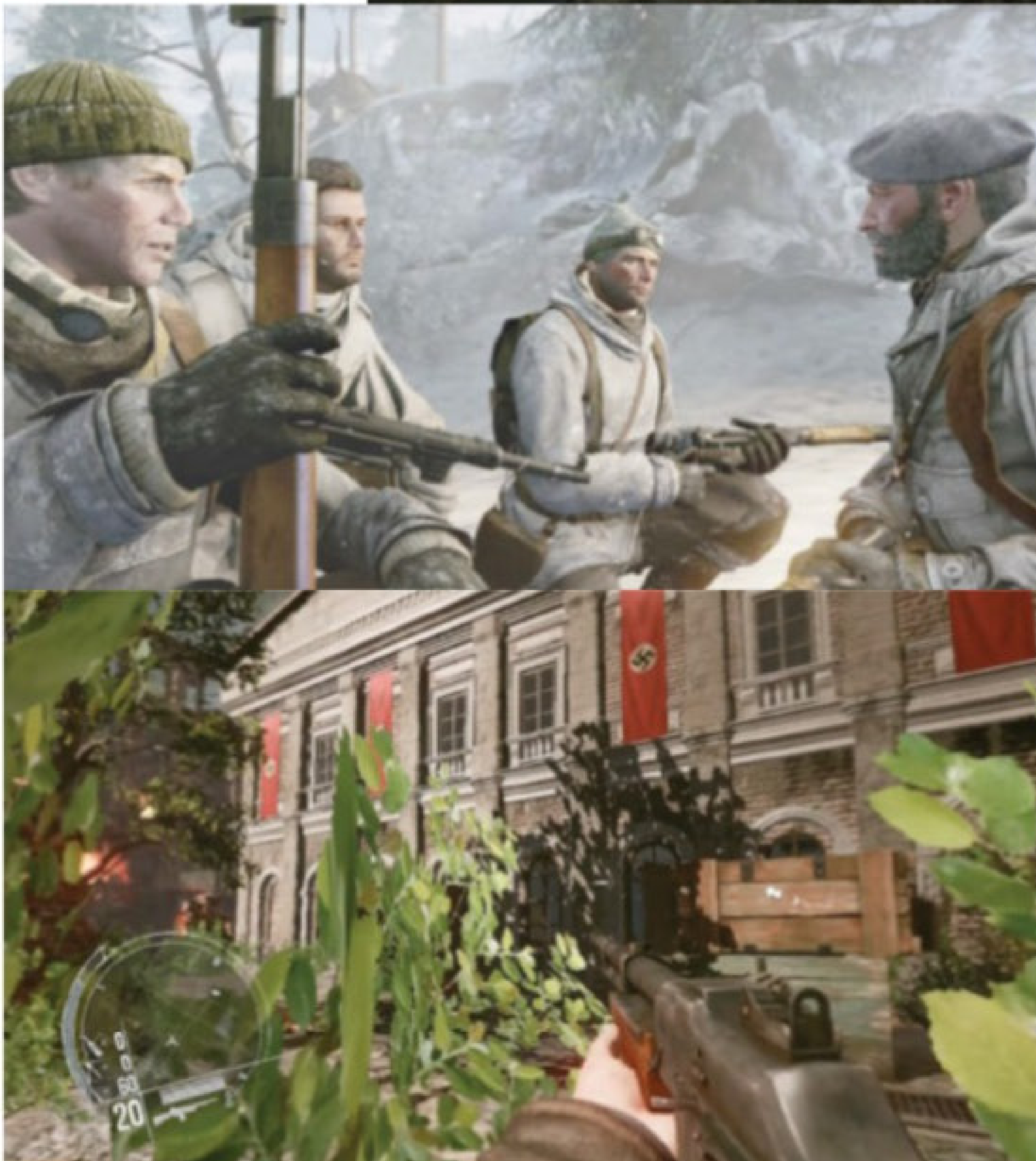
Q. DO I KNOW THE DEVELOPER?

Possibly. CI Games has been responsible for some less than stellar games, such as the rip-roaring *Sniper: Ghost Warrior*. Still, *Lords Of The Fallen* looks cool.

Left: Choices like this are a great inclusion, but they happen far too infrequently as the game progresses. If this were the case throughout then players would be able to tackle missions how they see fit more often.



Right: Time-bombs are a neat touch, but you only ever use them in dedicated scenarios and locations.



Below: The compression that runs riot throughout the cutscenes is too noticeable, detracting further from the already paper-thin exposition.

– initially at least – sombre aspirations. The game's loading screens (which you'll be seeing a *lot* of) depict the horrors of war in a sort of dynamic freeze-frame, complete with poignant piano stylings. It hints at a more understated experience but, alas, this wasn't the case by the end of the game's relatively short running time. *Enemy Front* even has a breach and clear mechanic that has been taken wholesale from Activision's FPS behemoth, a button prompt and a shoulder barge throwing you into a slow-motion sequence in which you have ample time to pick off the German soldiers that lie in wait.

Using something that is so synonymous with *Call Of Duty* is one thing, but the game also appears to have appropriated something even more identifiable in the form of slow-motion sniper shots, which are a lot harder to ignore. It appears randomly, but occasionally you'll fire a long-range shot from a sniper rifle only to see the camera pan around in front of the player (the war journalist/killing machine) and then track the bullet as it leaves the end of your gun and enters the Nazi combatant. The detailed X-ray elements are missing, but we've seen this very recently in *Sniper Elite*. It's fine 'borrowing' from successful games to an extent, but this is so similar as to prove distracting.

And if that seems slightly dishonest, imagine our concern when booting up the game for the first time to find that the graphics aren't even nearly at the level that they were shown to be in the press screens that were available prior to release. Everything is so compressed that we can now safely approximate what it would be like to suffer from cataracts. Everything is so washed out when enduring cutscenes – admittedly, the actual gameplay looks a lot more crisp, but without the 200,000 layers of heavy compression over it the game is rife with glaring textural deficiencies. Pop-in, flat objects… everything is so wobbly that the game will often wantonly stop moving entirely for a few seconds (that's a frame-rate problem, frame-rate fans). It's just unreliable, to the point that it does harm your overall experience of *Enemy Front*. Screws clearly needed to be tightened.

It's a shame really, as there are a couple of things that *Enemy Front* actually manages to do rather well. For one the level design is a lot more open and varied than you might expect, allowing you to explore (and murder) in your own way. A couple of follow-the-man sections aside, it is generally a solitary experience, and so paths through the game's environments are often left to player choice. On a couple of early occasions we were given a choice between weapons offered to us by an NPC, as well as the option to tackle objectives in an order of our choosing. Little choices like this lift the overall *Enemy Front* gameplay experience somewhat.

But they aren't enough, as *Enemy Front* really is a poor game, and one not worth diving into. There are simply too many problems, from aesthetics right down to the basic mechanics, that sully the gaming experience. A lot of people bemoan *COD* and *Battlefield* for their annual assault on the industry and their perceived unwillingness to innovate, but there's no denying how tight the majority of these entries to their franchises are. CI Games has held a magnifying glass to these popular franchises, borrowed what it wants and failed to implement any of the ideas effectively.



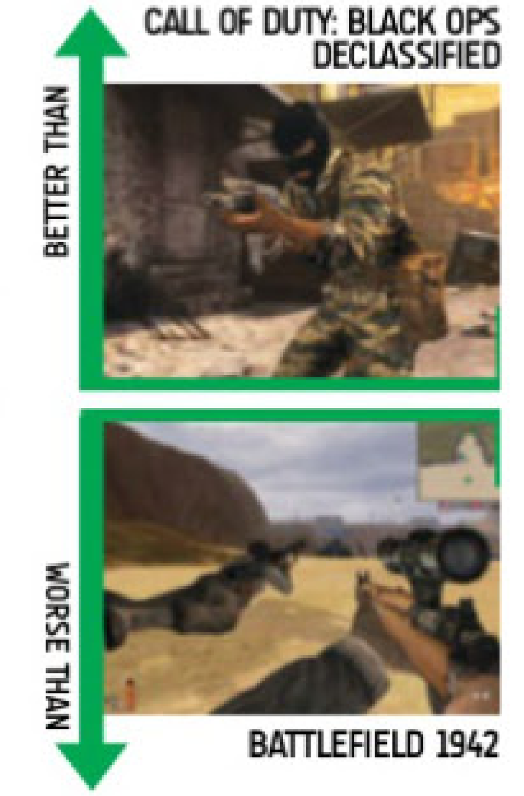
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PRIORITIES: CI had the ambition but not the power of execution. Instead of shoehorning multiple mechanics into a new, budget IP, it should have focused on creating a competent, simpler title, at least for now.

LOVE BUG

Enemy Front suffers under the weight of bugs that, while mostly cosmetic, do damage the experience. Some are downright shambolic, mind. At the end of a long, drawn-out assault on a Nazi facility in Norway, all on-screen prompts decided to give up the ghost and just vanished completely – cue us stumbling around from point to point. Texture pop-in and weird AI dance routines – wherein the enemy would move in the most peculiar ways – were fairly common throughout, but a cohort of nurses wandering rigidly around a hospital *carrying invisible objects* topped it.





AMBITIOUS IN SCOPE, BUT POORLY EXECUTED

RETRO STYLE IN SPADES

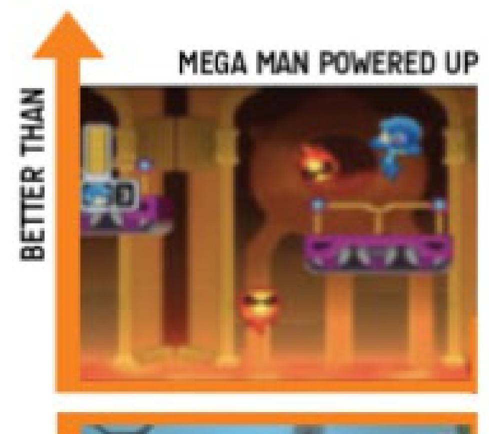
Shovel Knight

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux, Wii U, 3DS
ORIGIN: North America
PUBLISHER: Yacht Club Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: OS: Windows XP SP2 Processor: Intel Core 2 Duo 2.1 ghz or equivalent Memory: 2 GB RAM Graphics: 2nd Generation Intel Core HD Graphics (2000/3000), 256MB DirectX: Version 9.0 Hard Drive: 200 MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

MEGA MAN POWERED UP





SUPER MEAT BOY

WORSE THAN

Retromania and indie developers go hand in hand; it's a marriage made in Kickstarter heaven. But the best kinds of retro-inspired games are those that don't just cash in on crowd-funded nostalgia but combine design lessons from the old and the new, and *Shovel Knight* does just that.

The nearly-NES colour palette might be aimed straight at those born in the Eighties, but developer Yacht Club Games seems more interested in using that general theme of simplicity and limitations to benefit the game. Simple animations and snippets of text are enough to tell us the story of Shovel Knight and his quest for his lost love Shield Knight. That shovel only offers a few moves – dig, slash, etc – but each feels pure. The pogo-stick-style jump attack is particularly satisfying, especially since modern gaming affords us the use of an analog stick.

The game has a simple structure, too, with eight themed knight bosses to beat before the final antagonist. Each knight has their own level with different kinds of hazards from spikes to lava to storms that leave the level dark but for temporary flashes, yet each can be bested with only that shovel. Additional magical items – like a wand that shoots fire – do muddy that mechanical purity but are useful aids, though those who need them most may struggle to hold onto enough gold to buy them.

Death will likely be frequent, at least at first, as enemies move quickly and hazards are everywhere. It will frustrate some players, despite frequent save points (another benefit of modern gaming), but success has little to do with reaction times and even less to do with luck. In the days of the NES, enemies didn't have complex AI and emergent behaviours. They followed learnable patterns.

Shovel Knight is all about learning patterns. Each level teaches you the characteristics of its unique elements – platforms that only move when loaded with extra weight, opaque screens that hide pitfalls, etc – and then provides more complex situations in which to apply those lessons. It might feel like a slog, but you'll realise how effective this is as you fight the bosses and realise how far your training has brought you.

Once you've realised that all you need is patient attention, you'll feel free to explore more of what the game has to offer. You'll collect stray music sheets that will make you just as happy as the bard who pays you for them. You'll give handouts to moochers in a town shop and have your generosity rewarded with a fight with the owner. You'll beat the final boss and immediately start a New Game+, frustration forgotten, eager to get back in and dig a little deeper.

FINGERPRINT

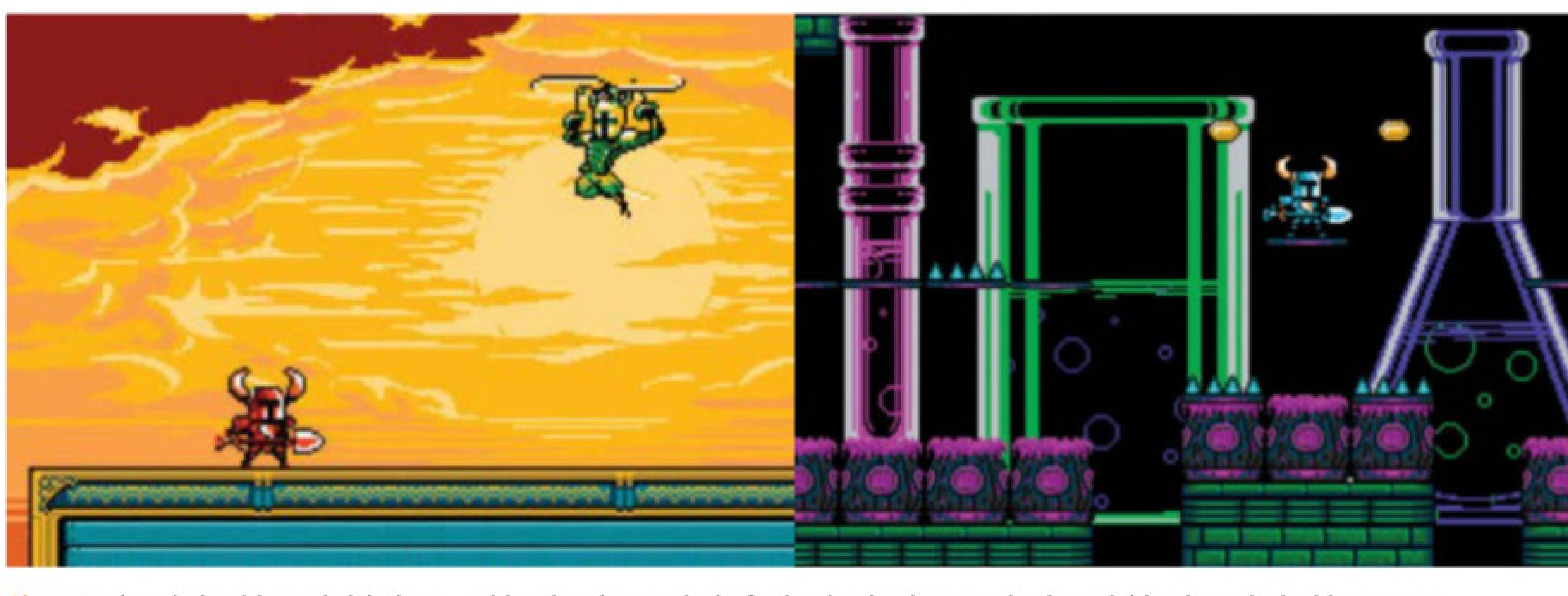
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ACE OF SPADES: In most games, a shovel is a temporary weapon at best, a last resort. But Shovel Knight scorns swords and spears for the sake of his signature spade.



Above: Just like Scrooge McDuck with his cane in *DuckTales*, Shovel Knight can bounce on his shovel like a pogo stick, attacking enemies from above or jumping off things to reach a greater height.





Above: Each main level has a knight boss, and beating those unlocks further levels. The map also has mini levels packed with treasure.

VERDICT 8/10

BURROWS DEEPER THAN JUST 8-BIT NOSTALGIA

MINUS THE CUBES

Q*bert: Rebooted

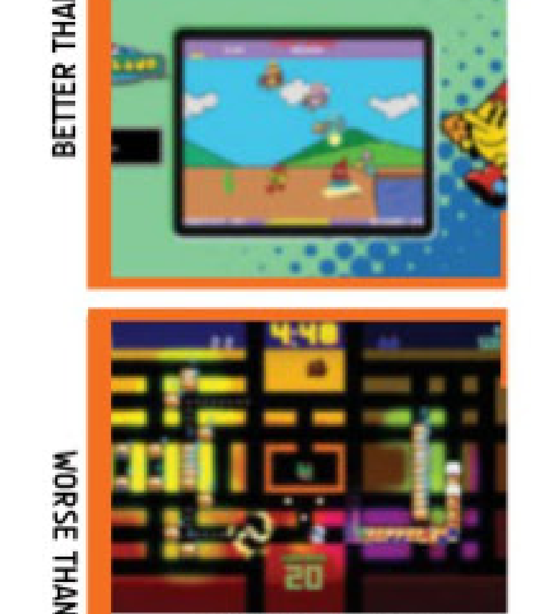


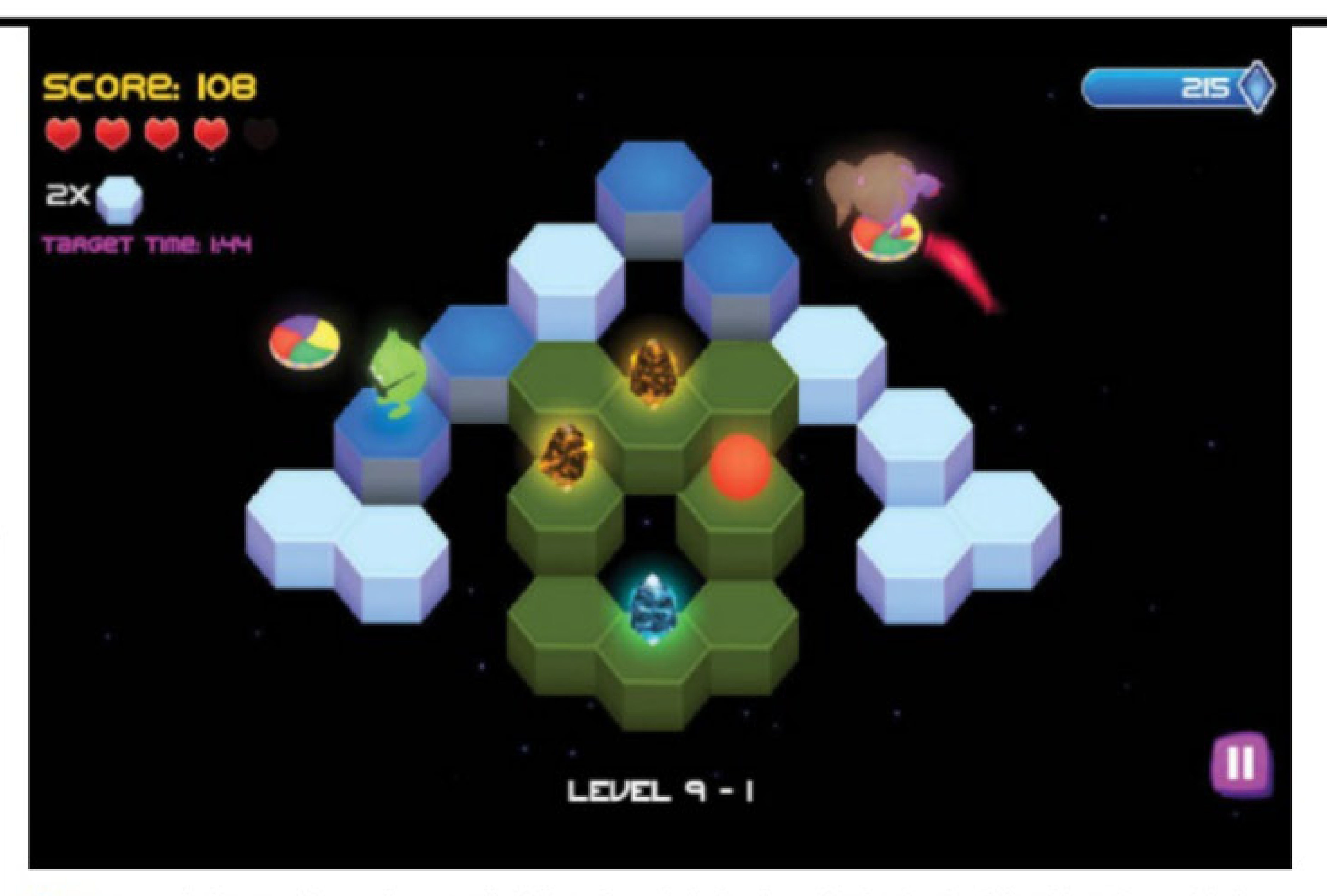
One of the most popular games of the golden age of arcade gaming, *Q*bert* certainly isn't the most regularly revisited, having been absent from our screens for nearly a decade. While *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* receive sequels and ports regularly, the snorkel-nosed protagonist of Gottlieb's 1982 arcade hit has often been overlooked in spite of his Eighties merchandising power. *Q*bert: Rebooted* aims to correct this by reintroducing the classic block-hopping gameplay of the original with modern visuals and a few gameplay twists.

At first look, the game appears to have everything it needs: switching from square platforms to hexagonal ones has enabled new stage designs; three new enemies have been introduced; and the progress map shows a pleasing number of stages. But the first clue that something is amiss comes when you try to play using mouse controls, which are rather too sensitive and often cause frustrating deaths as a result. Switching to a joypad eliminates this issue, but there's a larger, unavoidable problem.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, Android
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sideline Amusements, Gonzo Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £3.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1 GHz processor, 4GB RAM, 512MB disk space, DirectX compatible graphics card, DirectX compatible sound card or onboard sound





Above: Gameplay hasn't changed a great deal from the original *Q*bert*. The basic principle of jumping on blocks to colour them remains the same, but the hexagonal blocks give more potential escape routes when enemies bear down on you.

Unfortunately, it seems that the lack of attention *Q*bert* has received over the years has caused an undesirable development – the game wants rather more of your time than it warrants. In order to progress through the *Rebooted* mode, you need to earn stars by completing stage objectives. This would be no problem alone, but despite showing all three objectives at the beginning of each stage, only one is ever active. It doesn't matter if you fulfil the criteria for the third challenge on your first try – you'll need to replay the stage twice to receive the star. Star limits are set at levels that make stage replays mandatory, damaging the game's long-term appeal rather than enhancing it.

It isn't all bad, by any means. There's a perfectly good version of the classic arcade game included, a welcome inclusion that will please long-term fans. This bonus underscores the fact that the core *Q*bert* gameplay remains compelling over three decades on. The game even includes a range of additional characters, who demonstrate a good enough understanding of *Q*bert*'s appealing qualities that we found ourselves collecting the gems required to unlock them. Unfortunately they're a superficial addition, offering no real gameplay variations.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STAGE GOALS: Games have been able to track progress against multiple goals in one stage for a long time now. If it were up to us, *Q*bert: Rebooted* would do so too.

Like any good arcade game, it's best enjoyed in short bursts. *Q*bert: Rebooted* is a simple release, but one that captures the key strengths of its arcade forebear well. Sadly, the game is somewhat hamstrung by its progress system – you'll get bored of playing the same stages repeatedly in order to get anywhere.



TOO AVERAGE TO INSPIRE A @!#?@!





Above: Bonus stages are an odd inclusion, serving only to grant lots of gems. The gems serve only to help you unlock new characters, and are in plentiful supply throughout the game anyway.

OF GODS AND MEN

Divinity: Original Sin

19,541 people believed in *Divinity: Original Sin*, enough to boost the Kickstarter campaign to success. Larian Studios, the team behind the previous games in the franchise was promising great things, bold things, impossible things. And yet somehow this unassuming developer from Belgium has delivered on its promises, and then some. We're not going to be so bold as to suggest that *Divinity: Original Sin* is the greatest RPG you'll ever play, but we're hard-pressed to see how anything is going to come along and top this in the immediate future. Larian Studios has crafted a game that not only takes the genre into new and interesting directions, but also pays homage to some of the greatest RPGs of old, from *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment*, to *Ultima VII* and *Fallout*.

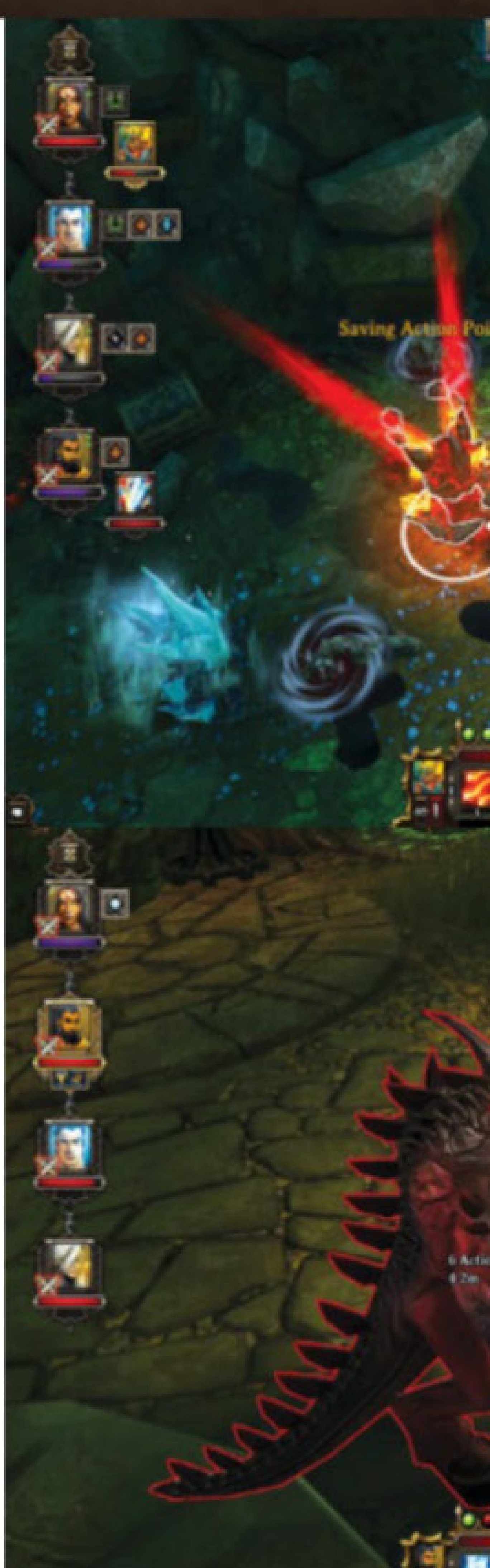
One of the most interesting aspects of *Original Sin* is the way it puts you in control of two characters (it can also be played multiplayer). While it's not the first time a *Divinity* game has done this, it feels far more in-depth than before, as you're able to develop the personalities of your heroes alongside their stats and spell points. There are many sections of the game where banter will take place between the two leads. Sometimes it's little more than a chance to get in a fun pop culture reference, but more often it's there to determine the morals of your character. It's quite refreshing to have your two leads disagree with each other and it sets things up nicely for the sheer diversity and inventiveness that's to follow.

By far one of the most engaging aspects of *Original Sin* is its excellent combat system. It's the first game in the series to be turn-based and Larian has embraced the flexibility that offers. While your core party is only four-strong there are all sorts of ways to handle the many enemies that *Original Sin* throws at you. Action points are your bread and butter while playing, allowing you to do anything from quaff a potion to summon an ice elemental. Points are determined by your speed, perception and constitution and more points allow for more options. One particularly nice touch is how you can save unused points for the following turn, changing your strategy accordingly, or simply storing them up for more powerful spells.

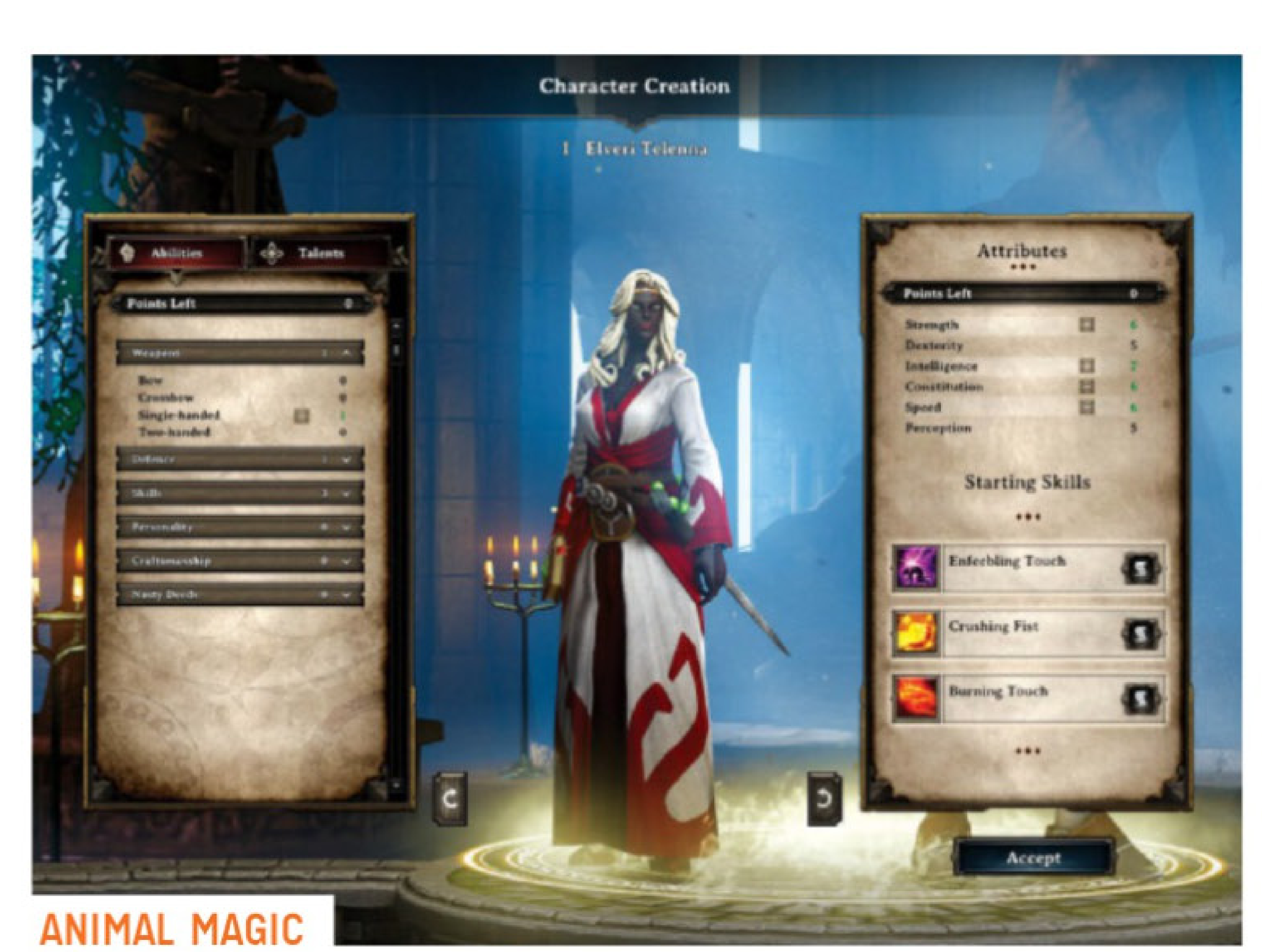
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: NA
ORIGIN: Belgium
PUBLISHER: Larian Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows XP SP3 or higher, Processor: Intel Core2 Duo E6600 or equivalent, Memory: 2048 MB RAM, Graphics: HD Intel Graphics 4000 or NVIDIA GeForce 8800 GT (512MB) or ATI Radeon HD 4850 or equivalent, Hard Drive: 10GB, Sound Card: DirectX9c compliant
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



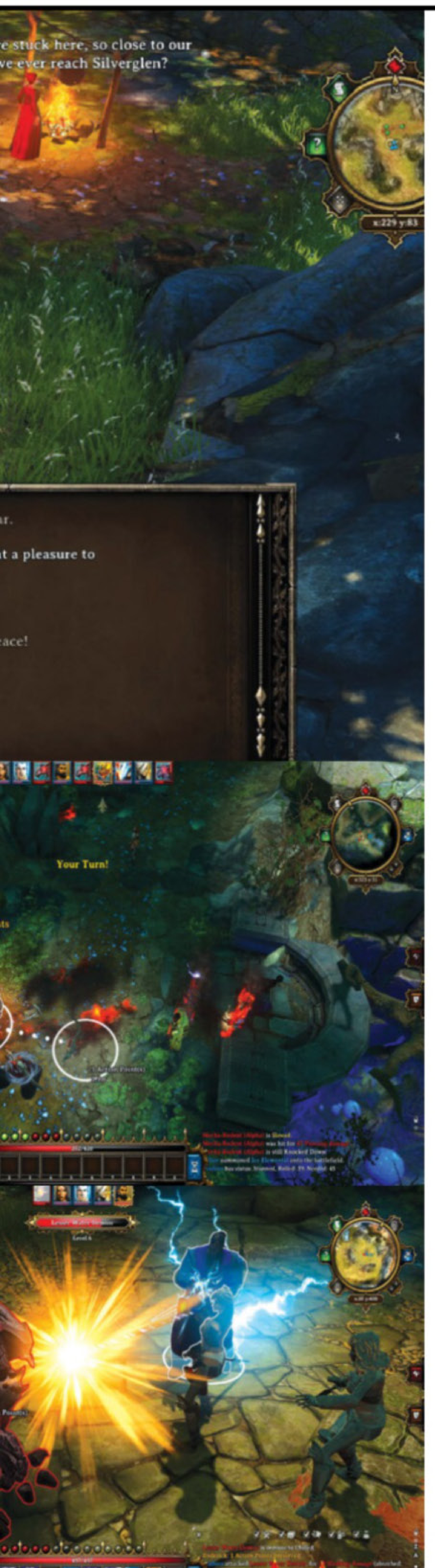


Above: There will be times when your leads won't always agree. Do you come to a friendly conclusion or remain at odds with each other? The choice is yours. **Right:** You can increase the size of your party by summoning creatures like elementals to fight alongside you.



ANIMAL MAGIC

Early on in the game it's possible to buy an ability that will let you talk to the animals you encounter. Every single animal in the game, from chickens to pigs, have something to say – sometimes funny, sometimes pointless – but it's a further indication of the sheer depth that *Original Sin* offers. Larian Studios has created a dense world and it wants you to experience every part of it. Rats are by far the most learned of the animals you encounter, typically able to give you clues and insight into the dungeons you're inhabiting and the creatures and bosses found within them. Of course, you can go through the entire game without even using it, meaning that you're totally oblivious to the complex animal hierarchy that's going on around you.





And there are plenty of spells to fling around in *Divinity: Original Sin*, with the majority of them being elemental-based. In fact, elements are critical to its combat, allowing you to pull off all kinds of clever attacks. Fire an ice spell into a pool of water to freeze enemies trapped within it (or make them hilariously slip); create explosions by combining fire with poison; electrocute enemies by firing lightning at wet foes – the possibilities are near endless. Perhaps you'll want to buff up your team and send in elementals, or use teleport to fling an enemy into their friends, damaging everyone in the process – the combat choices on offer in *Original Sin* feel near limitless, and while there can be some tough difficulty spikes, careful consideration of your environment and your available skill sets normally yield victory.

Choice isn't just confined to the battlefield, however, as *Original Sin* lets you approach its engaging story in a number of different ways as well. There are numerous options when solving the main quests and side-quests that litter the world of Rivellon, meaning you don't need to simply think with your sword or spells. Do you use rain to defuse a living bomb, or teleport it away where it can't endanger the NPC it's guarding? Do you simply kill a person who's stolen a powerful artefact, or try stealing it from them instead? The sheer choice presented feels astounding at times, and it's a testament to Larian that it always feels two steps ahead of you. In fact sometimes the sheer choice offered can be overwhelming as *Original Sin* is a title that refuses to hold your hand, believing that experimentation should be your main motivation. It's the *Dark Souls* of traditional RPGs but, like that game, it's crafted so finely you'll simply plow on, enjoying your epic adventure. This in itself is a good thing, as *Original Sin*'s story, which starts off with two trainee source hunters investigating a murder, does take a good while to get going.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

FUN WITH FRIENDS: *Original Sin*'s drop-in and out gameplay works extremely well, although the inability to read the text logs of the active character is a pain that will hopefully be corrected.

FAQs

Q. IS THIS A SEQUEL?
It's actually a prequel, but don't worry, you don't need knowledge of the previous games to enjoy it.

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS?
11 – Battlemage, Cleric, Enchanter, Fighter, Knight, Ranger, Rogue, Shadowblade, Wayfarer, Witch and Wizard.

Q. THAT'S NOT FLEXIBLE…
Ah, but you can buy abilities as you level, effectively letting your Cleric fling fireballs. Just check your base stats first.

Virtually everything in *Original Sin* can be moved and manipulated, nearly every character has something to barter, and new weapons, armour and spells can be crafted from a staggering amount of different items. It's incredible just how complex the world of Rivellon is. You'll want to explore every last nook and cranny, engage with every character, discover every last secret. There's a huge 50-hour game in *Original Sin*, but completing it is only the beginning thanks to a planned level editor and Steam Workshop.

WE'RE HARD-PRESSED TO SEE HOW ANYTHING IS GOING TO COME ALONG AND TOP THIS IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE

For all our praise, *Divinity: Original Sin* isn't perfect, with cumbersome item selection and occasionally unclear quest updates being among the most annoying. Still, they're not game-breaking, and when you consider how well Larian is supporting *Original Sin*, these issues may have already been patched by the time you read this. It's is one of those rare Kickstarters that does everything it originally promised. Yes, it lacks the polish of the biggest triple-A games, but it has heart, and it feels alive. It's a wonderful love letter to the halcyon days of RPGs, but also creates new standards for others to follow. In short, it's incredible.



Above: The world of Rivallon is gigantic. This is only its opening act and will take many hours to fully traverse. **Left:** The robust elements-based magic system affects everything in the world, from combat encounters to traps strewn about a dungeon. It gives *Original Sin* a playful quality as you learn the various rules its world works by.



A REFRESHING, ENGAGING RPG THAT SETS NEW STANDARDS

A CLONE IN THE DARK

The Swapper

Right: When you begin to encounter lights, you'll notice the difficulty begins to ramp up: certain colours prevent you from 'swapping' whilst others prevent you from even generating clones.

What was a good game on the PC is a great game on the PlayStation; between claymation visuals that manage to communicate the familiar whilst being unique and a novel singular mechanic that pushes the whole game experience forward, *The Swapper* is a puzzler that feels engagingly fresh, yet uncannily familiar at the same time.

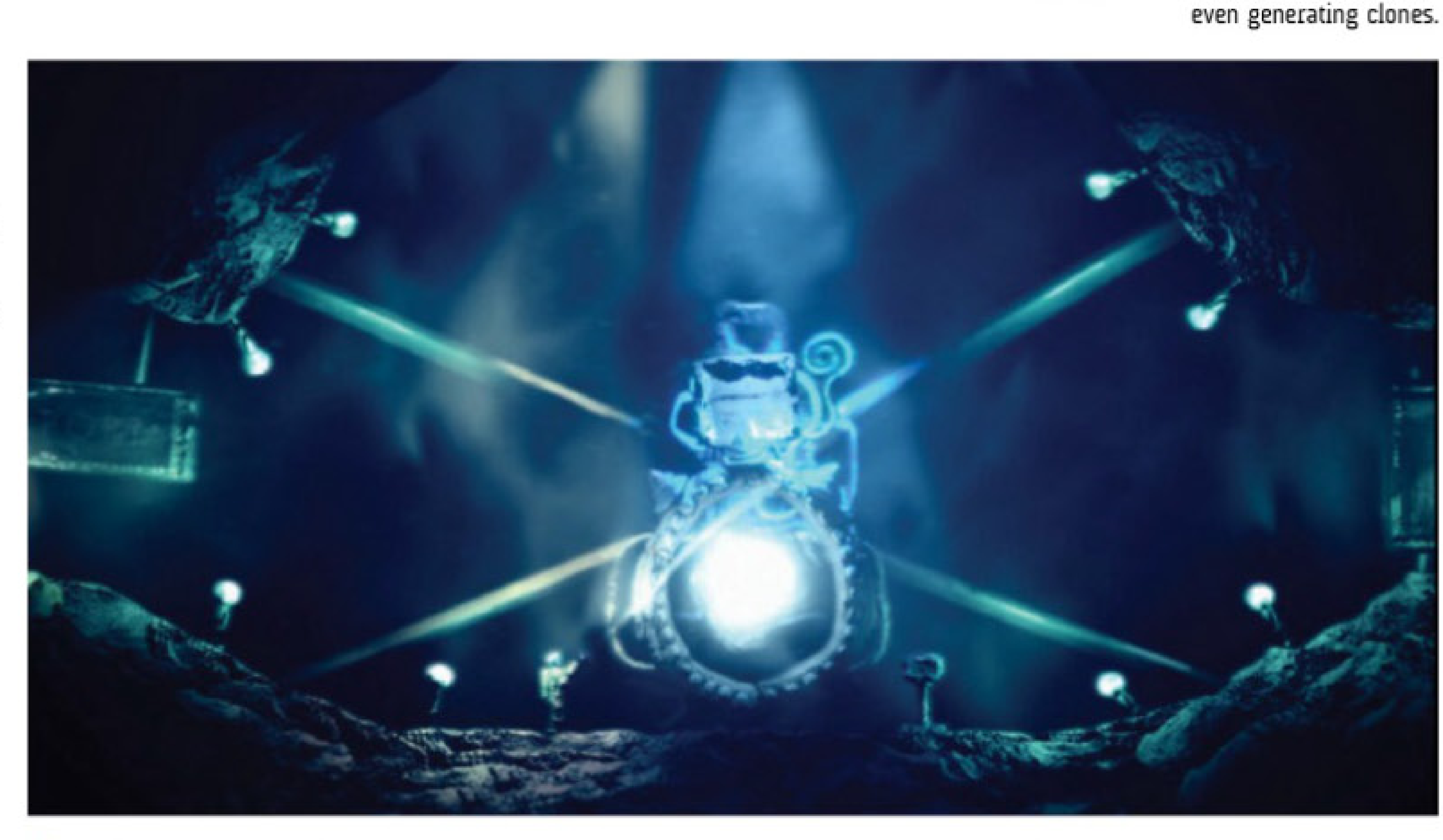
The premise of the game is simple – you play as an astronaut in command of the eponymous Swapper device; a gadget that allows you to transfer your consciousness into clones that you can materialise out of thin air. You can have a gang of up to four doppelgängers accompany you at any one time (so long as they're in your line of sight) and they'll mimic your every move (think of the Mudokons in *Abe's Oddysee*). You take over a clone's consciousness by firing yourself into their mind like a telekinetic bullet, and this is the *single* mechanic the whole game is built around. You'd think that gets repetitive, but it doesn't.

There is, for example, an objective a couple of hundred feet below you. At first it seems impossible, until you realise that you can generate a clone at the last minute and throw your mind into it, migrating just as your previous body slams into the ground – with a frankly amazing collection of sound effects creating the illusion that every bone in your old body is shattering. Though the only player-activated mechanic is 'swapping', you'll also have to learn how to manipulate the game's physics to progress: between inertia, gravity and split-second timing, you'll find the route home. Think *Portal*, in a world written by Iain M Banks, made by a group of people that grew up playing *Oddworld*.

The act of 'swapping' weirdly affects your agency, too – the game kind of puts you in charge of respawning, and as soon as you swap into your first clone, you can't shake the feeling that you're no longer you: rather, your astronaut is inhabiting the body of a fabrication, a skin-job. There aren't any enemies in *The Swapper* – you're only ever a threat to yourself. Every time you see your old body get ground up, or slam into the boulders of the alien planet, there remains an attachment to it, an uneasy feeling you didn't complete the puzzle correctly.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Facepalm Games, Curve Studios (PlayStation versions)
DEVELOPER: Facepalm Games
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



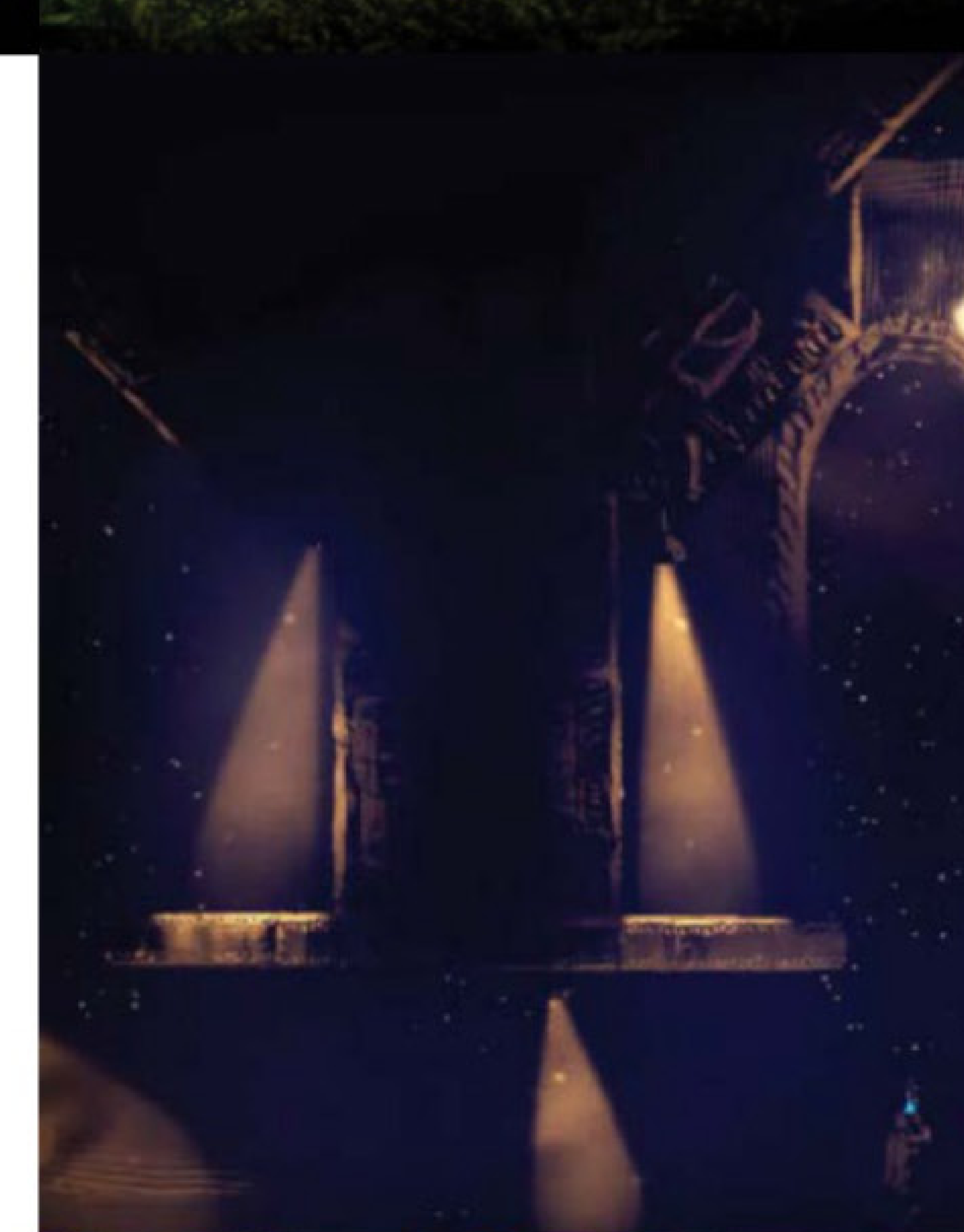
Above: The lighting engine deserves an honourable mention in *The Swapper* – it probably accounts for 90 per cent of the atmosphere

But you did; you must have done, as there is only ever one or two ways of bypassing a challenge, and it's a credit to the narrative designers that this game makes you feel so uncomfortable and intrigued, in a completely non-verbal way. It's genre sci-fi at its most organic, with themes of transhumanism, morality, science and faith delicately interwoven into an experience that's around six hours long.

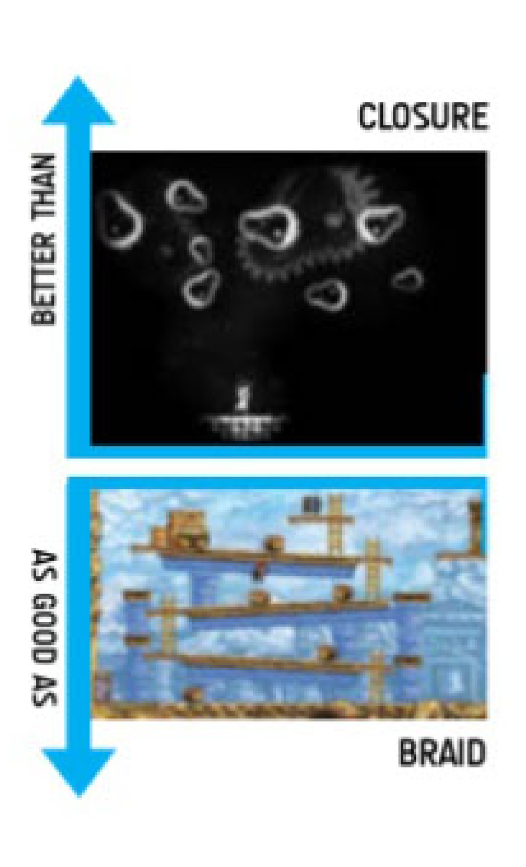
The writing fuses the singular 'swapping' mechanic with thematic hooks that you can

THINK PORTAL, IN A WORLD WRITTEN BY IAIN M BANKS, MADE BY PEOPLE WHO GREW UP PLAYING ODDWORLD

Above: Your ship – the Theseus – evokes a sense of place from the very moment you enter. All the best bits of survival horror level design is incorporated into a game that has no enemies. It's subtly terrifying, and wholly engaging.







FAQs

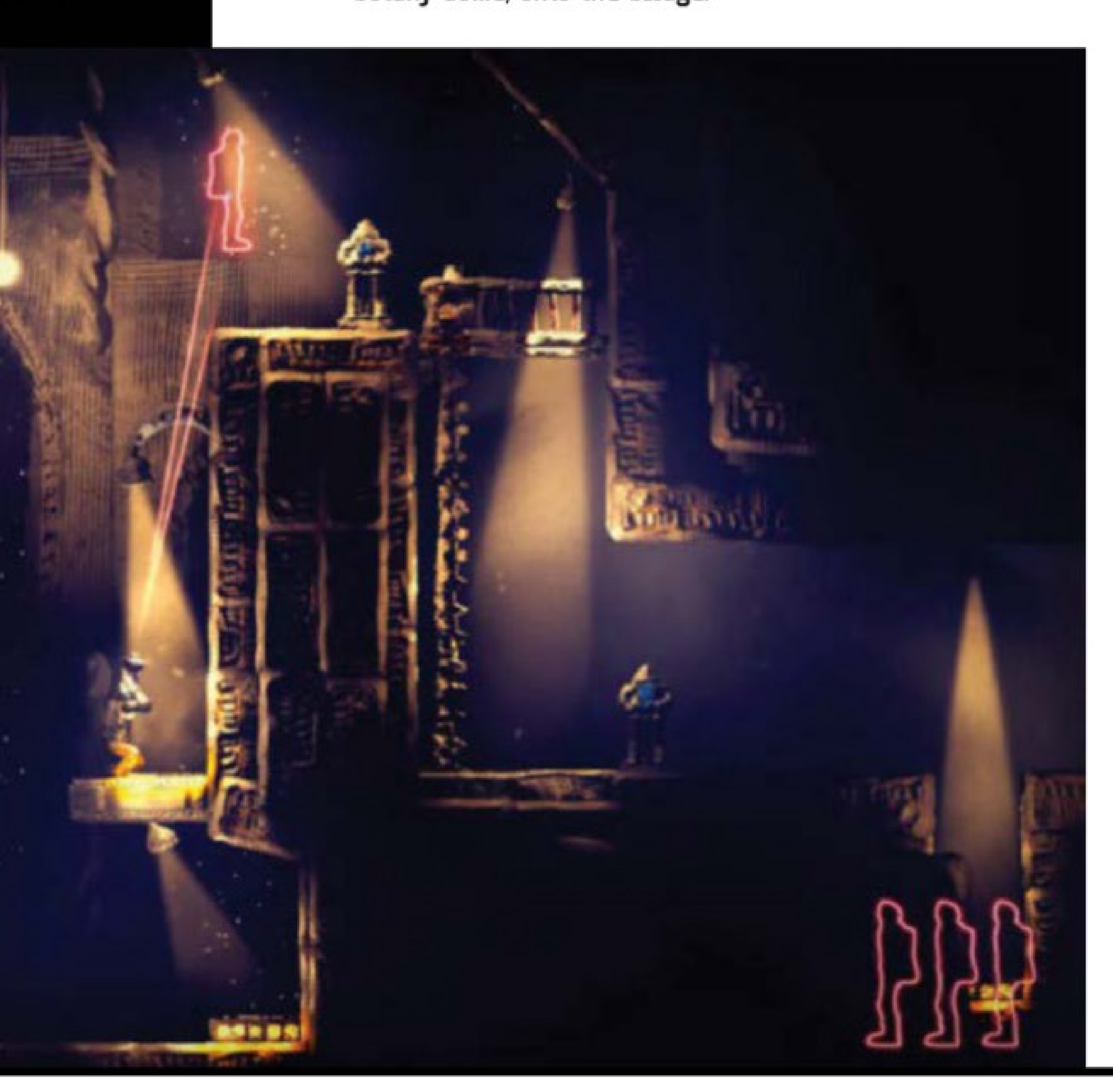
Q. WILL IT MAKE ME ANGRY?
Probably. We got stuck on a puzzle for about four hours.

Q. WILL IT LAST LONG?
If you're gunning for all the trophies, expect to get a little over eight hours out of the core game

Q. TALKING ROCKS?!
Probably the weakest part of the overall narrative, but yes; there are some talking rocks that fill in some of the story.

MAKE ME OUT OF CLAY

No sci-fi story is complete without a fully-realised and engaging world in which to focus a story. *The Swapper*'s use of claymation and real-world items, wrangled to look like the inner corridors and rooms of a crumbling spaceship, pulls this off with aplomb, bringing something unique to the realm of the 2D puzzler. Observant players will be rewarded with nuanced storytelling and subtle hints as to what happened to the desolate world you find yourself on, all right there in the scenery. It becomes a game in itself to guess what each in-game thing is made of – 'is that a tin? Is that a real plant?' we were asking ourselves as we wandered around the spaceship, into the botany dome, onto the bridge.



feel getting under your skin as you move from room to room. It's perfect bitesize fiction – the game equivalent of an essay of Orwell's or an Aldous Huxley short (the environmental storytelling takes on a more literal sense than we'd like, but it fits in the game's weird universe easily enough). The way the game imparts back story and atmosphere through non-verbal means is watertight: some of the best we've seen from an indie game. The verbal side, though, is clunkier, even a little uncertain at times, which is somewhat disappointing.

If all that thematic pondering and philosophical metaphor isn't for you, don't worry, the game still has plenty of appeal – it's a mark of the level designer's talents that each puzzle feels like a task in and of itself, and that each new challenge requires some different mental calibration to overcome. Each level takes the guise of a new chamber on the player's domestic spaceship, and though *The Swapper* has only 'swapping' in its mechanical inventory, the design incrementally introduces obstacles that prevent you from swapping (or cloning), applied on a room-by-room basis. The difficulty curve is executed so well that puzzles are never frustrating or boring.

All of this is compounded by a unique off-world setting, reminiscent of *Dead Space*'s USG Ishimura or *Alien*'s Nostromo, but with its own unsettling eeriness that comes not from Necromorphs or aliens, but isolation and uncertainty. That sounds incredibly vague, but the claymation world that developer Facepalm Games has literally created (and then digitised) manages to impart a sense of place through its execution and insistence on remaining isolated. The more you pick away at the various threads that reveal themselves to you, the deeper the sense of melancholy and fatalism spliced into the game's DNA becomes.

You're going to get stuck, you're going to get frustrated, and you're going to hate yourself every time you make a clone and throw away your discarded body, just to pass a puzzle. *The Swapper* has stuck with us as we've moved on to play other games: it makes you think that every failed attempt at a mission – every respawn or terrible death – has a tangible human cost. *The Swapper* manages to be both a perfect example of 'genre fiction' (it's a sci-fi experience up there with *Moon*, *Solaris* or *Alien*), it also manages to make itself an exemplar of a 'genre game' – a puzzler so fresh in its ideas, yet so widely familiar, that no matter how you like your brain to get picked at, *The Swapper* will satisfy you.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SPACE & TIME: *The Swapper* isn't afraid to raise some pretty deep, soul-searching questions... and leave you to answer them without any more prompts.



GENRE SCI-FI PUZZLER IS VERY AT HOME ON PLAYSTATION

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Wayward Manor

Below: Visually the game really is poor. Low poly models, ancient lighting effects and an art style that's best described as irritating. It feels like an engine designed to run on cheaper mobile hardware rather than PC.

It's always a concern when a big-name 'real world' writer jumps into our world, but in truth authors have fared far better than Hollywood scriptwriters. Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* games were a delight, Tom Clancy pretty much revolutionised Ubisoft's entire output, and even the JK Rowling-powered *Wonderbook* on PS3 was a charming if underutilised effort at transporting her work into the videogame world. Fantasy master Neil Gaiman's touch isn't enough to save *Wayward Manor*, though. Instead, The Odd Gentlemen, the team behind the well-received *Misadventures Of PB Winterbottom*, has crafted a spectacularly irritating and deathly tedious puzzle game, and Mr Gaiman's lyrical prose can do very little to save it.

You play, strangely enough, as the manor in question, or at least a spirit who has been locked within its walls. Your aim is to scare the living daylights out of the inhabitants, eventually revealing the story of why you are stuck in the house, why you hate the people living there and how you can get out. The story starts in the middle and slowly unravels, revealing more about the inhabitants as you progress. It's an intriguing concept. Many games let you take a detached viewpoint and control multiple things at once, but few actually let you play as a ghost. However, what could have been an interesting experiment in AI and interaction boils down to little more than frantic mouse clicking, trial and error, and utter tedium.

DETAILS
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Moon Rock
DEVELOPER: The Odd Gentlemen
PRICE: £7
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



IT SHARES AESTHETIC QUALITIES WITH POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURES, BUT PLAYS LIKE A MOBILE GAME

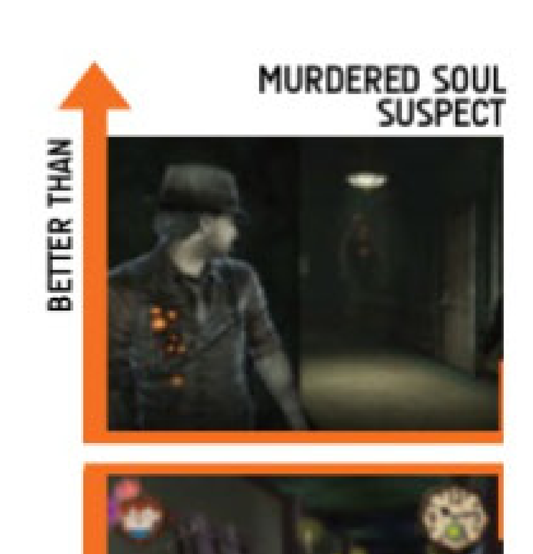
Each level features one of the story's horridly drawn characters moving around a room, carrying out the most basic of AI patterns. Certain objects within the room glimmer with a green glow, meaning you can click on them and wait for a reaction. And that's it. The idea is to scare the room's inhabitants five times, which will then let you press a button so everything in the room flies into the air and spins around. To scare them, you might need to make a bottle drop on their head, or manipulate a rat to scuttle past their feet. When they're scared, they stop still, and a cartoon skull appears from their mouth and floats to the top of the screen.

Clicking on specific items in the room will always cause the same outcome, so through trial and error you learn how to effectively move the character around and into the traps you've set up. Scare them five times and you can move on. You're rewarded for scaring them in specific ways, but only in the form of extra stars on the end-of-level screen, which amount to precisely nothing.

Matters do get slightly more interesting when multiple characters get thrown into the mix. The mother of the house, for example, always visits the weird little dress stands (that are dotted around the room for no reason) when you click on them. The maid always cleans up cobwebs. Blend those two interactions and you can scare them both at the same time. And as the characters never learn or change their patterns, you can often rinse and repeat.

As *Wayward Manor* gets more complicated, it wants you to explore different combinations and figure out solutions. And it is reasonably successful in that respect – eventually, randomly clicking on everything isn't enough to guarantee success – but you never feel clever; there's no ingenuity. It's just busy work. Execute enough scares, and the room will inexplicably fill itself up with more clutter, offering more frightening solutions to your problems. It's all very messy.

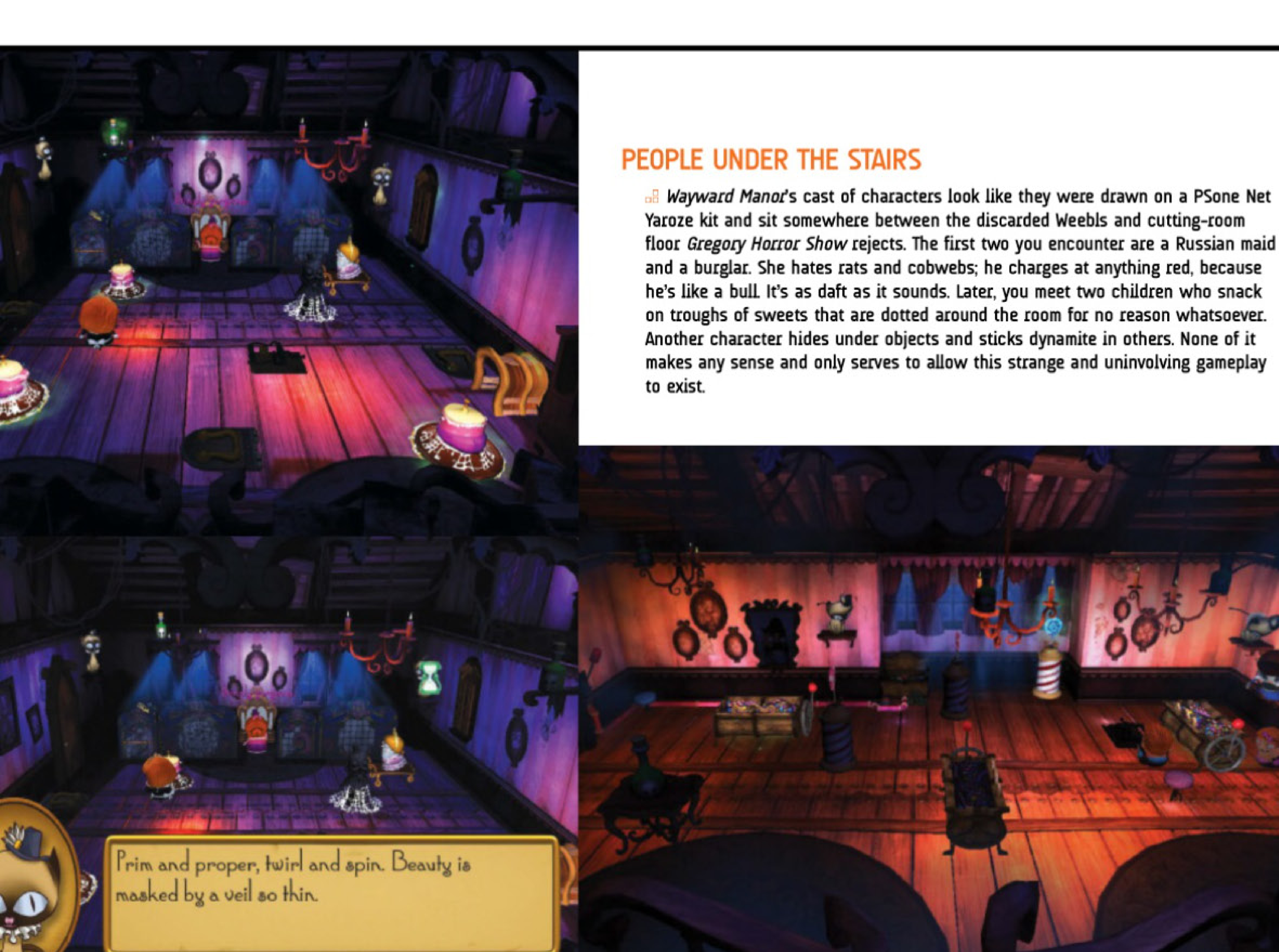
BETTER THAN: MURDERED SOUL SUSPECT



WORSE THAN: GREGORY HORROR SHOW



By the end of the final chapter (of which there are five, with five levels in each), the difficulty has been ramped up to infuriating levels. The number of potential scares is reduced while the character count is upped, and you have to figure out the exact order in which to click everything to make it all come together. None of this is helped by the fact *Wayward Manor* has an exceptionally aggravating soundtrack. Every interaction is



PEOPLE UNDER THE STAIRS

Wayward Manor's cast of characters look like they were drawn on a PSone Net Yaroze kit and sit somewhere between the discarded Weebls and cutting-room floor *Gregory Horror Show* rejects. The first two you encounter are a Russian maid and a burglar. She hates rats and cobwebs; he charges at anything red, because he's like a bull. It's as daft as it sounds. Later, you meet two children who snack on troughs of sweets that are dotted around the room for no reason whatsoever. Another character hides under objects and sticks dynamite in others. None of it makes any sense and only serves to allow this strange and uninvolving gameplay to exist.

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Only four hours or so.

Q. WORTH GETTING IF YOU'RE A GAIMAN FAN?
No. The gameplay only detracts from anything he might have otherwise accomplished.

Q. WILL IT APPEAR ANYWHERE ELSE?
Expect a mobile version. It seems purpose-built for that interface.

Left: The sound effects that play relentlessly are enough to have you reaching for your Spotify account. Quite how anyone thought this was a good idea is baffling. The same noises are on a loop forever.

Above: The writing is sporadic yet obviously strong, but without a decent game to pin it to it feels like it exists in a vacuum, trying to lend weight to a piece of work that has none.

accompanied by its own sound effect, all of which make nails on a chalkboard sound like Sigur Rós. These interrupt each other, so you're treated to the aural equivalent of a drunken orchestra falling into one another, all while you solemnly try to move these boxy little characters around the map, wishing for the end. It is genuinely unpleasant, and reminiscent of the *Harry Potter* OST played in reverse, or on a badly skipping CD.

Wayward Manor shares aesthetic qualities with point-and-click adventures – characters with expressive faces, a penchant for snappy non-sequiturs and, of course, mouse-driven interactivity. But it actually plays like a mobile game. Perhaps it would be a better fit for the iPad – offering a basic set of interactions that could appease Gaiman fans without ever troubling a classical gaming audience.

Yet you have to wonder exactly what Gaiman is getting out of this, he of grand sweeping fantasy and detailed, meticulous world building. When you think of Neil Gaiman, you think of something big, something all-encompassing, or at least something with density and depth. *Wayward Manor* is none of these things. Yes, the sentences are well written and help to elevate the very basic action to a level that feels somewhat important, but you can't help but feel that those who obsess over all things Gaiman are going to be left cold by such an odd little game.

It's hard to understand why the game exists. Did Gaiman desperately want to attach himself to an ugly, boring puzzle game? Did The Odd Gentleman really think this was the best way to display his work? It's more of a mystery than the actual story of *Wayward Manor* itself.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CLICK BAIT: *Wayward Manor* asks you to click things and see what happens. It seems like that is all The Odd Gentlemen could really come up with. It's not exactly *EVE Online*.

VERDICT 3/10
TEDIOUS, IRRITATING AND SERVING ALMOST NO PURPOSE



Above: Puzzles get gradually trickier, but never amount to anything more than frustrating clicking. This isn't a game that values subtlety or thought – trial and error and eventual victory are the orders of the day.



Above: It's disappointing that British losses at the Somme only get a cursory mention.

A WORK OF UBIART?

Valiant Hearts: The Great War

If nothing else, *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* offers a rare chance to view a World War from a fresh perspective, rather than through the eyes of an American soldier gazing down the iron sights of a rifle. Happily, its distinctive take on a conflict relatively unexplored in the interactive medium has plenty more to enjoy, its tale of heroism and sacrifice movingly told despite some credulity-stretching contrivances and a few jarring tonal missteps. It's a success in that regard, and a worthy one, too – unlockable documents offer genuine educational value, while characters' diary entries (based on journals from war veterans) offer further insight into the minds of those who suffered through it. Grafting satisfying game mechanics onto this narrative, however, proves a challenge that Ubisoft Montpellier isn't quite able to overcome.

It's a multi-threaded story, its protagonists' paths crossing throughout. German farmer Karl reluctantly joins the war, while French father-in-law Emile soon finds himself captured by the enemy. He soon forges a friendship with a revenge-seeking American named Freddie, while nurse Anna tends to everyone's wounds. Finally there's Walt, a service dog whose presence could so easily have been milked for cheap sentimentality, but who instead plays a more utilitarian role, fetching objects guarded by the enemy, digging up buried items, and squeezing through narrow gaps. He's such an engagingly loyal companion that you'll find it hard to resist patting him when he returns with a stick of dynamite between his teeth; indeed, this wordless communication is mirrored in the human interactions, too: grunts, gestures and short, mumbled soundbites subtly conveying everything from camaraderie to gratitude.

Ubisoft Montpellier (and its team of artists) skilfully draws these disparate personalities, with each story offering a different angle: 'lucky' Freddie leads several advances, surviving a number of nail-biting scrapes as he watches his comrades perish, while Anna deals with the aftermath of the violence and Karl is torn between duty to his country and his familial responsibilities. These may be fictional characters but they're symbolising very real struggles, and they're all easy to root for. Meanwhile, the war itself is evocatively realised, the wonderful hand-sketched art capturing the mundane minutiae as well as the broader strokes. Sometimes it's the more banal sequences that resonate loudest, notably during a rare moment of calm in the

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montpellier
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

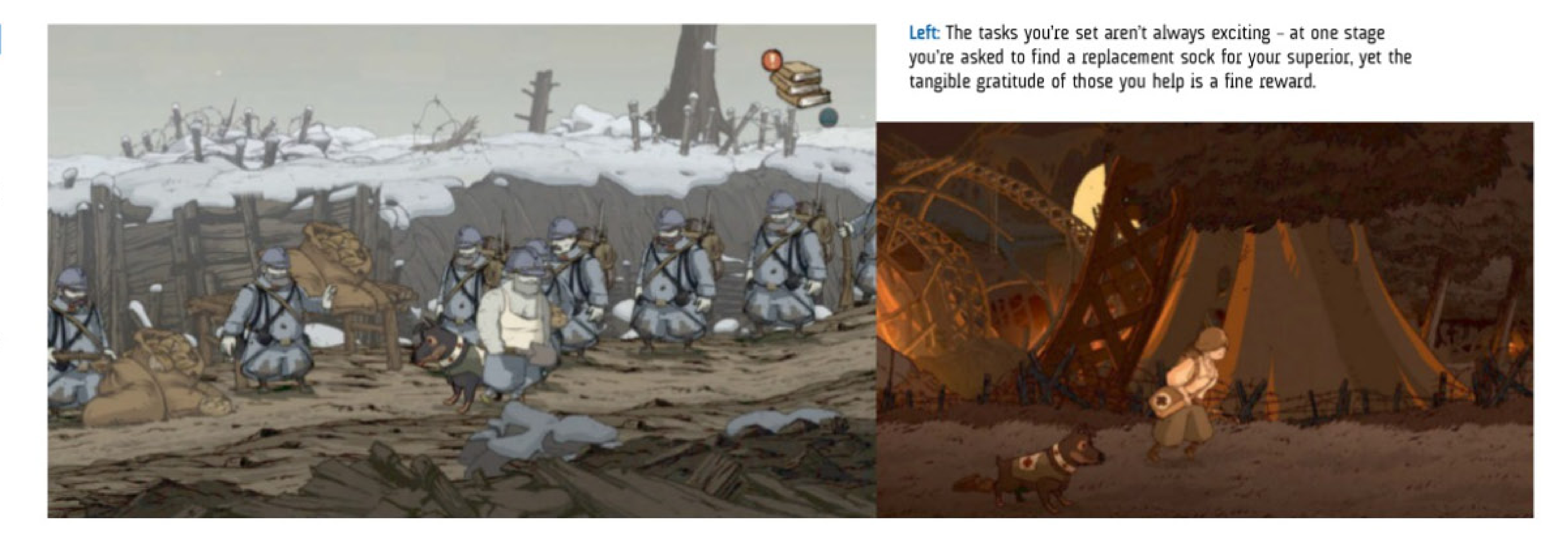
YOU'RE ASKED TO AVOID INCOMING FIRE WHILE WADING THROUGH THE CORPSES OF THE FALLEN

FAQs

Q. WILL I GET STUCK?
Probably not, though there are optional hints to call upon if you're struggling.

Q. WHAT'S VETERAN MODE?
This removes the highlight from any interactive objects and prevents you from using hints.

Q. TISSUES REQUIRED?
Yes. You'd need a heart of stone not to at least feel a lump in your throat once or twice.



Left: The tasks you're set aren't always exciting – at one stage you're asked to find a replacement sock for your superior, yet the tangible gratitude of those you help is a fine reward.



Right: Emile trades a ladle to a spade in the second half. Digging a route past buried explosives is nerve-wracking.

Below: As Emile, you can whack distracted guards with a soup ladle. The game just about gets away with that element of physical comedy.

trenches, where Emile is directly involved in a trading chain. And despite its cartoonish looks, it doesn't sugarcoat the horrors of war. Allies are scattered by explosions, fires streak across the land as acrid smoke fills the air, while later you'll be tasked with avoiding heavy fire as you wade through the corpses of the fallen.

The drama of the game's most successful setpieces is heightened by intelligent presentation. Comic book panels intrude to warn you of encroaching guards during stealth sections, and inform you when a machine gunner is empty and about to reload, prompting you to quickly climb above the parapet and race across to safe ground. There are thrilling escapes and last-minute rescues, notably when one character blasts shells at a vehicle rolling headlong towards another who's snared by barbed wire. Thanks to some exceptional sound design, these moments are thrilling even given the unsatisfactory way the game deals with death. You'll see friendly NPCs perish, yet whenever a playable hero is crushed or blown up, they'll be swiftly deposited at the nearest checkpoint. It's understandable in light of the game's desire to tell its story without inconveniencing its players too much, and often the mere threat of death or capture is enough to provide tension, in light of the situational context.

Elsewhere, the game's puzzles tend towards the simplistic or are clumsily crowbarred in. Anna extracts bullets and dresses wounds via rudimentary rhythm-action sequences as a heart-rate spikes along a scrolling, bloodied bandage. As Emile, there are too many instances of having to locate a long thin object to jam into place as a makeshift lever. Some of the physics-based conundrums are better, while one late-game episode that sees you negotiate gas-filled interiors has some inventive ideas, but as a general rule Ubisoft Montpellier has more success the less it relies upon traditional systems. One of the most moving interactions of the whole game involves nothing more complicated than walking forward; indeed, the occasions where you're free to simply wander and soak up the environmental detail are among the game's finest moments.

Valiant Hearts struggles to settle on a consistent tone, too. Occasional moments of levity are fine, but while its tone most often echoes the sombre feel of *Waltz With Bashir*, its action beats occasionally recall *Tintin* or the more cartoonish elements of Moore-era *Bond*. Rhythmic vehicle sequences set to the likes of Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight Of The Bumblebee* feel slightly crass, while one boss fight involving the creative use of a church organ is entirely out of place. It's followed by a prompt that you've unlocked a newspaper clipping, one of several to outline the grim realities of war. In light of that, everything you just accomplished feels all the more frivolous.

And yet this is a rare game that takes the time to commemorate a tragedy, exploring its human cost in a way that's both meaningful and moving, and relying upon core interactions that are mostly about helping others rather than harming them. It doesn't outstay its welcome, either, delivering its tribute in a brisk six to seven hours, during which you'll experience triumph and disaster, tears and smiles and a deeper understanding of a war that was anything but 'great'. Ubisoft's valiant attempts to make a great game from it may be in vain, but as a piece of interactive storytelling its heart is undoubtedly in the right place.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BAD BARON: Unlike WWII there's no single, obvious villain, so Ubisoft invents a moustache-twirling antagonist, Baron von Dorf. Though his comeuppance is as pleasurable as it is inevitable, his cartoonishness sits uneasily with the narrative's solemn tone.



A MOVING SNAPSHOT OF WARTIME LIFE

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

Valiant Hearts' even-handedness is one of its most significant victories. One caricatured villain aside, it takes great pains to point out that in times of war, there are victims on both sides. Anna comes to the aid of both Germans and French soldiers, while Karl's arc sees him struggle to come to terms with his role on the 'wrong' side. Meanwhile, the good guys aren't always painted in a favourable light – most notably in an electrifying setpiece, where a shrieking general forces his terrified charges to advance, even as they're mown down in their droves.



HOW ODDLY SELF-DEPRECATING. WHAT'S NEXT? "BORING SHOOTER?"

Lifeless Planet

It takes a certain kind of person to volunteer for a one-way mission to another world, and another still to embrace tagging along for the journey. *Lifeless Planet* is the latest story-based videogame to follow in the footsteps of *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, and other games that some call first-person exploration experiences and others simply dismiss as 'walking simulators' – and if that name alone doesn't suggest rather more atmosphere than thrills, consider it stated right here.

It's an interesting one though, getting a lot out of very little – an empty dusty world with seemingly nothing of interest at all, until turning a corner reveals an entire Soviet town some billions of miles out of place, with even our hero's snap judgement being that he's the victim of a some sort of hoax. But, of course, he's not, and exploring further only raises more questions about what happened, who a mysterious woman wandering around without a spacesuit is, and what secrets hide behind its merciless sands, lethal cliffs and murderous plantlife.

The main catch is that while 'not being a game' tends to be the stock complaint for this as-yet unnamed genre, *Lifeless Planet*'s attempts to be one are by far its worst elements. Weak and overly fussy platforming is a constant nuisance, as are elements like a robotic arm that has to be painstakingly used to solve problems, and a jetpack that would be far more fun if it wasn't usually restricted to a flatulent double-jump and only occasionally unlocked for a greater sense of mobility. As open as things look, you're following a linear path, and the best obstacles are the ones that feel like they emerge naturally out of the scenery and setting. Having to do things like push a stone sphere off a platform and roll it to a wall just breaks the illusion. It doesn't help that the controls can be fussy, even when just pressing a button to call a lift.

Trekking through the sands, though, is an involving experience, picking up the story through both cutscenes and scattered logs that are thankfully translated from the 'original' Russian. As ever, talking too much about the story would spoil it. It definitely begins better than it ends, but the generally stark ambience and methodical pacing both do a great job of keeping you into its world and appreciating the shift from simple sands to spooky caverns lit with footprints, and the occasional burst of nature standing out all the more for its scarcity.

There's no big game shift here; if you're not up for about six hours of walking and solving puzzles so light that they make opening your front door look like a Rubik's Cube, steer clear. If you're in the mood for a soft, sombre trip to another world, though, consider this for your next.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: None
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Kiss Ltd.
DEVELOPER: Stage 2 Studios
PRICE: £15
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Core 2 Duo, 1.5GB RAM, GeForce GT430+
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DEAR ESTHER





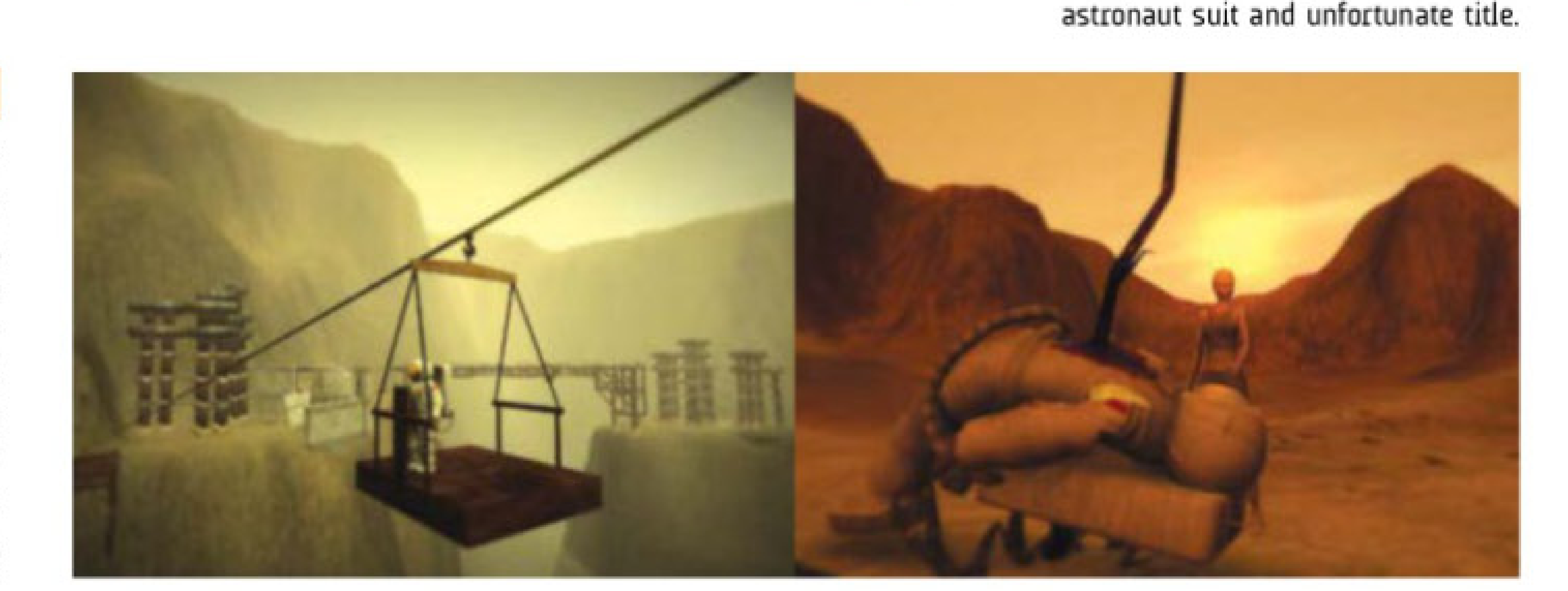
WORSE THAN

DEAR ESTHER

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EXPLORATION: More freeform exploring, or at least not feeling quite so locked down to a route. We would have loved to wander around a little more and get more of a feel for the world.



Below: There's no atmosphere on the planet, hence the astronaut suit and unfortunate title.

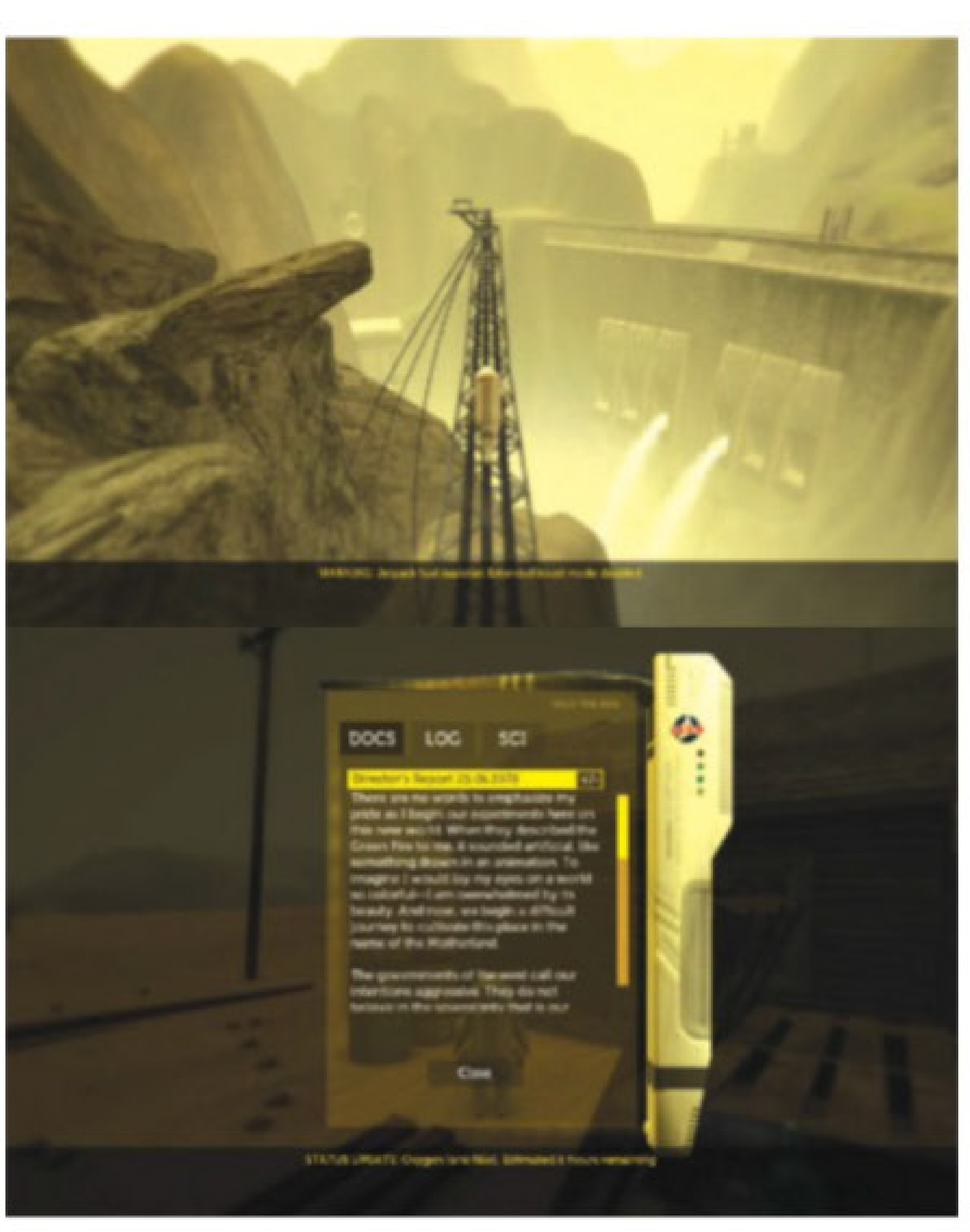


VERDICT 6/10

A THOUGHTFUL BUT LIMITED ADVENTURE



Above: Controls are stodgy, but they never feel like they're simulating anything particularly realistic. Especially with the jetpack.



ONCE UPON A CRIME...

The Wolf Among Us: Season One

Right: Outside of the climactic scenes, the game's best moments are those when your responses add colour to a conversation.

An adaptation of the *Fables* series of comic books – or rather, a prequel story using the same characters – may have seemed an unusual choice for Telltale Games after *The Walking Dead*, but it has allowed the Californian studio to tackle a new kind of genre fiction, following its biggest success to date. But while the world of Fabletown and its inhabitants are sharply realised, Telltale comes a little unstuck in trying to use a similar template to tell a markedly different story. The result is a series that often struggles to convincingly marry mechanics and narrative.

Not that you'd necessarily notice anything wrong from the opening episode. It's a strong start in an attractively grimy setting, a suburb of New York where well-known characters from fantasy fiction, using magic to assume human form, eke out a fairly miserable existence. Almost all are struggling to make ends meet, and many are borderline destitute. And yet this is a world rich in colour, albeit often lit in lurid neon, and with shadows dipped in the blackest ink. It's certainly a more distinctive aesthetic than *The Walking Dead*'s muted, post-apocalyptic palette.

It begins with a vicious QTE brawl, which quickly establishes that while protagonist Bigby Wolf isn't quite as big nor as bad as the legend would suggest, he's still pretty handy in a fight – as well as offering a reminder that Telltale is better with dialogue than with action. A slow burn of intrigue follows, before a shock that sets up the season's main mystery, as Bigby begins to investigate a grisly murder and finds more than he bargained for. The four episodes that follow are more uneven in quality and pacing, and if the conclusion is a little too heavy on those button-mashing interludes (which the developer's heart clearly isn't in), it manages to tie its narrative threads together in a satisfying fashion.

Yet as a crime procedural, it's undoubtedly flawed. You'll interrogate shifty suspects and press apprehensive witnesses for information, as the narrative frequently leads you down cul-de-sacs. You'll learn more about the characters and the world than the central mystery, and while that helps give you a clearer picture about Fabletown, you rarely feel like you're getting much closer to finding out whodunit. Indeed, when you're finally invited to finger the perpetrator, while you can take an educated guess, there's no satisfaction to getting it right because you won't have uncovered any evidence that could have logically led you to that conclusion. It is, then, a detective game where you're not really allowed to make your own deductions. For all its flaws, at least *LA Noire* allowed you to draw your own conclusions based on testimony and evidence and act upon them accordingly.

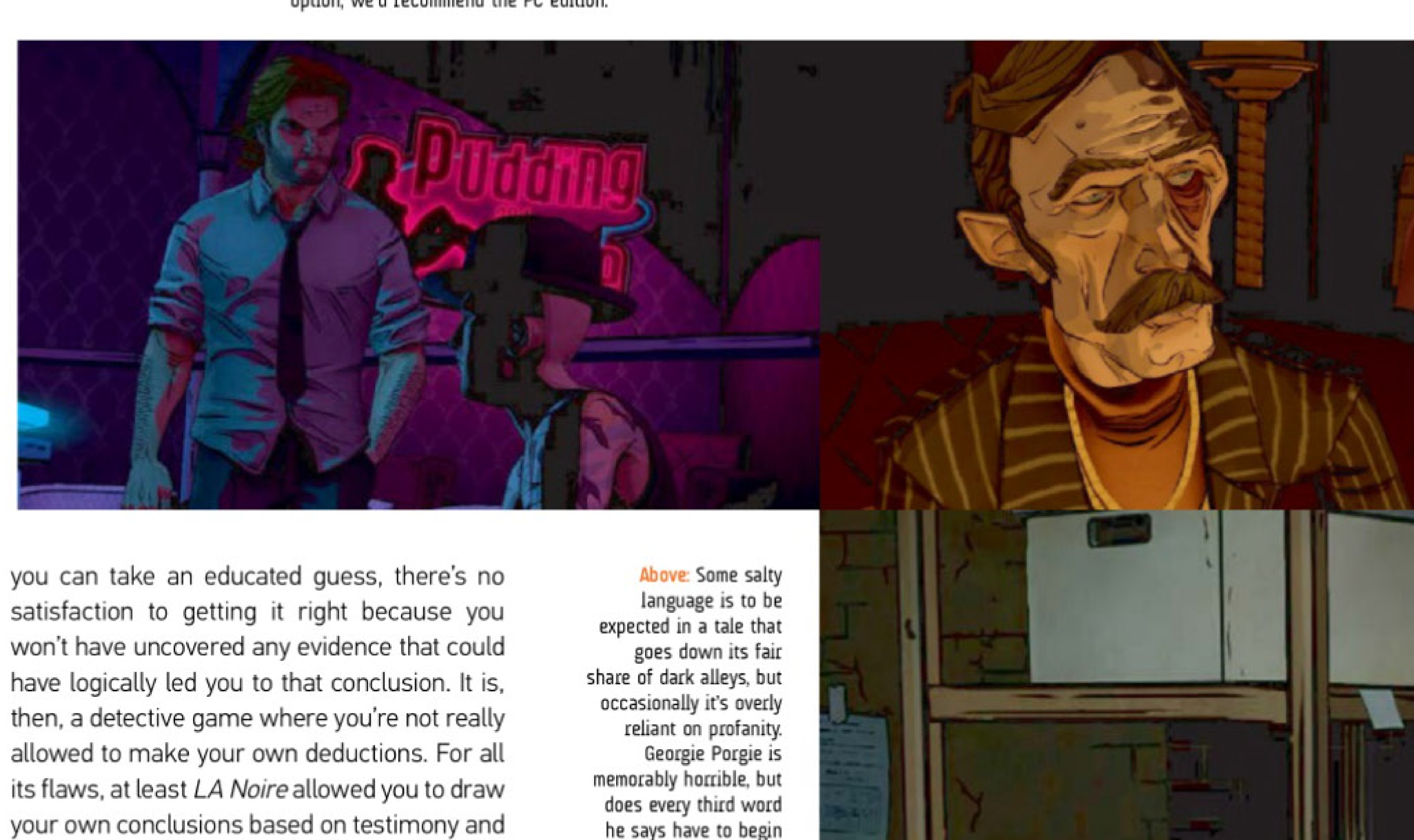
At times, Telltale visibly struggles with that pesky 'game' part. On more than one occasion you're placed in a room with nothing to do but examine objects, each leading to a close-up of

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.99-£10.49 (console/iOS)/£18.99 (PC)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 2GHz, 3GB RAM, ATI or NVidia card w/ 512 MB RAM, 2GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

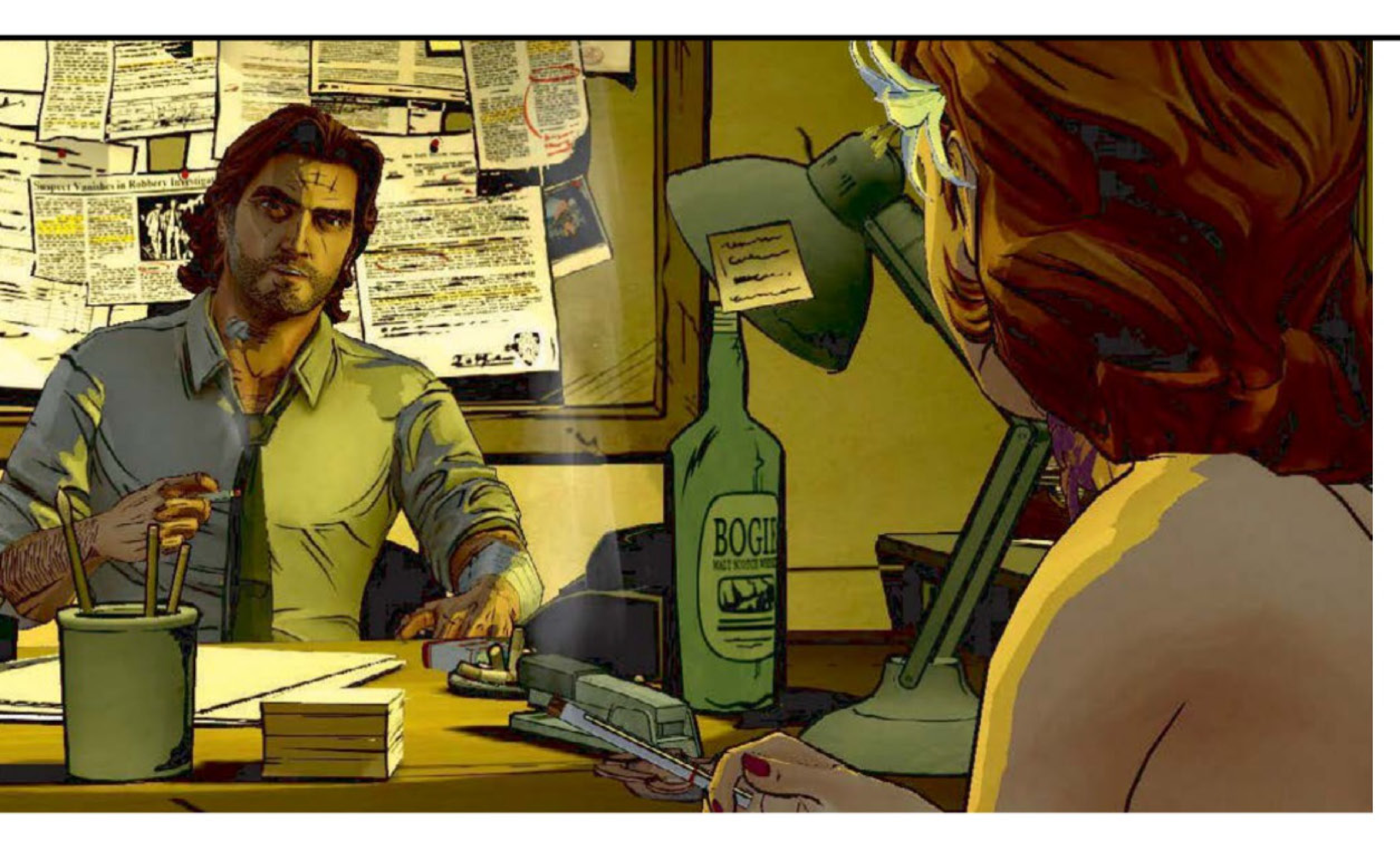


Above: On the console versions, the transitions during action setpieces disrupt their flow. If you have the option, we'd recommend the PC edition.



Above: Some salty language is to be expected in a tale that goes down its fair share of dark alleys, but occasionally it's overly reliant on profanity. Georgie Porgie is memorably horrible, but does every third word he says have to begin with 'f'?

WHILE YOU CAN STRAY FROM THE MAIN NARRATIVE PATH, TELLTALE'S GUIDING HAND IS CONSTANTLY NUDGING YOU BACK TOWARDS IT





FAQs

Q. BEST/WORST EPISODE?
The season premiere and finale are both strong. Episode 4 is the weakest.

Q. WHICH VERSION?
It might cost more on PC, but you've far fewer technical flaws to put up with.

Q. DODGIEST ACCENT?
Georgie Porgie's Northern twang isn't half bad – certainly a cut above Toad's clunky Cockney.

HUFF AND PUFF

Though they're sometimes well-staged, there's a lack of tension in the fight scenes. Whether you're clicking to punch or bludgeon an opponent, or jabbing a key or a button during a moment of physical exertion, Bigby's simply too strong to fret over, and because he's the lead you know he's never in any serious danger. It's a question of context: you might be confident of Clem surviving a scrape in The Walking Dead but her vulnerability makes the zombie threat feel more convincing, and you can never be too sure anyone else is safe. Quite apart from that, a frantic escape from a grasping walker is naturally more nerve-wracking than a brutal punch-up, no matter how much blood is spilled.



Bigby passing comment on them. Eventually, once you've exhausted all options, you'll trigger the next piece of story. On occasion you're given the opportunity to visit two or three locations to chase up a lead, but a replay reveals that the order rarely matters much.

You're kept on a very tight rein throughout. You can opt to play Bigby as something of a reformed character, or give into his animal instincts and fierce temper and simply assault anyone who dares to be uncooperative. Whichever option you choose, there are moments of quietude or outbursts of anger that sit at odds with how you're trying to play him. It's a troubling reminder of how little agency you have at times. You're simply assuming an existing role: Bigby's character is already established, and there are limits as to how you can shape his behaviour.

It's only in the final chapter that your actions begin to have tangible consequences. It's prompted by the belated arrival of an antagonist who represents the flipside to Bigby's gruff justice, and while his introduction is unsatisfactory in a narrative sense, his expanded role in the late game sees you begin to question even seemingly minor choices. It's an examination of the ambiguities of justice in a world as unruly as Fabletown, where moral dilemmas come in several shades of grey. It forces you to question what is and isn't ethical, whether it's best to go by the book or what feels 'right'. It's not even so much about how you behaved, but how that behaviour might look to others. The result is a discomfiting moment for both player and protagonist, and comfortably the season's highlight.

What a pity, then, that your lack of influence elsewhere is laid palpably bare, most notably as we were prevented from keeping a promise we had every intention of fulfilling. A reminder, perhaps, that you can't please all of the people all of the time, but also that while you can stray from the main narrative path, Telltale's guiding hand is always nudging you back towards it.

At least the season concludes with an unexpected final reveal, one that should provide a solid grounding for another five-episode run. And yet as the credits roll, it's hard not to feel slightly disappointed: though Bigby Wolf is a likeable, nuanced lead and Fabletown a world that warrants further exploration, the cracks in these structural foundations are impossible to paper over. While *The Walking Dead* demonstrated the potency of interactive fiction, there are times here where Telltale struggles to dispel a disquieting notion: that *The Wolf Among Us* doesn't necessarily benefit from the player's involvement.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TRUE DETECTIVE: We'd like to see Telltale credit us with some intelligence and let us figure out where to go or who to talk to next – or at least offer a tangible reward for putting the pieces together.



NICE STORY, SHAME ABOUT THE GAME

A LOAN PURSUIT

Tales Of Xillia 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 22 August (Japan: Out now)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Would you sacrifice a parallel universe to save your own? That's the moral dilemma at the heart of *Tales Of Xillia 2*, a game that struggles with quandaries of its own. In some respects, it demonstrates a desire to shake things up; in most others, however, it appears the developer hasn't the inclination to change too much. Furthermore, while those who played the first game may relish the opportunity to catch up with familiar faces as they cross the path of new protagonist Ludger Kresnik, the same audience will be the ones to notice just how much in here has been recycled.

Ludger himself represents one of the game's biggest problems. He's a mute protagonist, the kind designed to allow the player to project their personality onto him. It takes skilful writing to make this work in a world where every other character speaks, but his silence often just makes him look ignorant – particularly as you will get to hear him on occasion. In *Xillia*'s optional skits – and even sometimes in cutscenes – he'll mutter the odd word, whether it's a grunt of acknowledgement, a "huh?" or a "yeah". It doesn't help that his facial expressions either make him look gormless or like he's smelled something truly awful.

This may well be an attempt to show exactly how a person can be defined by their actions rather than their words. The plot of *Tales Of Xillia 2* involves the existence of several parallel universes, which will occasionally bleed into the main one. In each case, it's the job of your party to find the cause and essentially get rid of it, in the process eradicating this other world and everyone within it. It's an interesting idea that leads to much soul-searching among a cast of mostly good-natured individuals, but again it demonstrates the game's divergent personality. The darker plot sits uneasily with the often light-hearted tone of its skits and the joviality of its characters.



Above: Ailments will wear off, but you can speed your recovery. If Ludger is afflicted by a burn, you can run around to get rid of the flames, or perform a taunt to avoid nausea.

Below: Press R1 to view an enemy's elemental weakness at any time. Use an attack with this element to deal more damage, and if you follow up with an attack of a different element, you'll increase damage.



FAQs

Q. BEST PARTNER?
Jude's healing skill is useful, but Rowen's protection from magic proves invaluable.

Q. BEST/WORST POST-BATTLE QUIP?
"A job well done!" / "I prefer medium rare."

Q. MOST IRRITATING CHARACTER?
Nova's relentless chirpiness as she takes your money quickly becomes intolerable.

Below: There's an impressive variety of post-battle animations and soundbites. Some are amusing, others indulgent. Happily, when you've viewed them once, they can be skipped.



CAT POWER

The game's longest side quest asks to locate 100 cats that have gone missing. Missions will periodically be posted to the jobs board, giving you not-so-subtle clues to their location, and you'll hear them mewing as you approach. While you're playing, any cats you've collected can be dispatched to areas you've already visited to pick up items – which, in some cases, allows you to complete other job missions. The more cats you have, the better your chance of a decent haul when they return, and if you supply them with Kitty Krisps, they'll come back quicker. There are daily bonuses, too. On a Sunday you can obtain three-times as many items per trip, while on Saturday your foragers will return 20 per cent quicker than usual.

BATTLES ARE OVER IN SECONDS, NOT MINUTES, AND THERE'S PLENTY OF FREEDOM IN HOW YOU TACKLE THEM

Revisiting the same world gives Bandai Namco the opportunity to expand an established universe, and those who enjoyed *Tales Of Xillia* will relish seeing how Jude, Alvin, Rowen and Leia (among others) have changed one year on – and yet they'll also find themselves exploring similar environments and battling many of the same enemies. This is naturally less of an issue for newcomers, and yet several references to past events assume a level of knowledge they won't have.

This wouldn't be as much of a problem but for the structure of the game. An early encounter lands Ludger with a ludicrous medical bill, which he's forced to pay off in instalments as the game progresses, and until he hits certain targets, travel restrictions will limit his exploration to certain areas. Game worlds in RPGs are often gated like this, but it's not only a contrived way to prevent you from progress. Between chapters of the story, more often than not, your sole objective is to pay off your loan, which is achieved by killing a given number of monsters, or by locating specific resources, highlighted within each area by white flashes. While *Xillia* felt like an intelligent streamlining of the occasional excesses of the JRPG, allowing time-poor players to simply follow the plot, this spends far too long preventing you from advancing the narrative, padding the game out with tedious busywork as you grind through the same enemies over and over.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

COMBAT EVOLVED: Though you can go through without ever mastering the battle system, you're encouraged to mix things up, with rewards for certain combos or for defeating enemies without being hit.

It's fortunate, then, that *Xillia 2*'s real-time combat – the grandiosely named Double Raid Linear Motion Battle System – has been improved. As before, battles are over in seconds rather than minutes, and afford you plenty of freedom in how you tackle them. Ludger can move around the battlefield freely, side-stepping and leaping incoming attacks, and teaming up with AI-controlled allies (whose behaviours can be customised to a great degree) for powerful link artes. Again, it's a case of targeting an enemy's weakness, but it's not just elemental alignments you have to consider. Now the protagonist can switch between weapons to better deal with certain foes. Guns allow Ludger to keep his distance, and are ideal for aerial attackers, twin swords are great for faster-moving foes, and those who are well-protected from the front can have their defences smashed with a blow from a slow but hefty hammer. Meanwhile, when a gauge in the bottom corner has filled, Ludger can adopt a more powerful form, enabling him to hit harder and absorb damage.

And yet, for the most part you'll feel a little overpowered. Most of the regular battles are insultingly easy, and when you've built up a strong affinity with certain partners, even the bosses fall without too much trouble. On the one hand, this alleviates some of the grind, meaning you can fulfil most job requests without even trying. But there aren't enough opportunities to strategise effectively when you can get through the vast majority of battles by mashing X, pressing the circle button every now and again for an arte, throwing in the odd dodge or guard, and then finishing them off with a link arte or two. Once you've discovered an enemy's weakness, it's often quicker to simply repeat the same moves – particularly as your allies are smart enough to heal themselves (and you) in a pinch.

That lack of challenge makes *Tales Of Xillia 2* relaxing to play – it's a perfectly pleasant, undemanding lazy-Sunday-afternoon game. If you're after something to engage your mind and your fingers, however, you won't find it here. It's hardly a disgrace to the *Tales* name, but there are other games within the series we'd far sooner recommend.





A SERVICEABLE SEQUEL, BUT THERE ARE BETTER JRPGS AROUND

WE'D RATHER NOT

Chibi-Robo! Let's Go, Photo!

Below: Collecting enough Stamps unlocks a special silhouette – can you be bothered to grind enough to fill out more than one Stamp card?



Augmented reality can be incredible when done well. The problem that creative developers are having when turning theory into practice, though, is that it's almost impossible to do well on a budget. When even relatively decent accessories like Kinect and the PlayStation Eye have issues with resolution and lighting that render any illusion attempted with them out of optimal conditions laughable, how anyone could think that the low-end on-board camera in the 3DS might fare better is beyond us.

Let's Go, Photo! certainly has a novel mechanic at its core, but sadly it's buried beneath a perpetual avalanche of filler and let down at every turn by the handheld's budget technology. You're given two silhouettes to begin with and are tasked with taking photos of real-world objects that perfectly match the outlines, but the issues become apparent within seconds of first hearing the virtual shutter click.

The first of these is that the judging system is fundamentally broken – we've seen perfect shots slapped with measly single-digit percentages and near-perfect scores handed out to things that aren't remotely accurate. Another problem comes as early as the second of the two free silhouette cards, poor localisation sending UK players in search of a continental plug socket, with even more region-centric howlers creeping in.

DETAILS

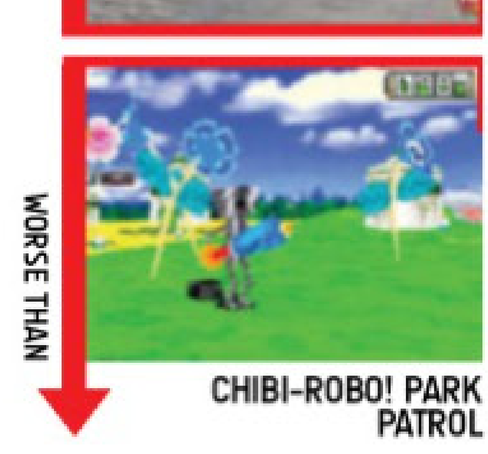
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Skip
PRICE: £11.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

REALITY FIGHTERS



WORSE THAN



CHIBI-ROBO! PARK PATROL

The novelty value of the AR photography hook might just outweigh the game's technical issues if you could simply snap away at your leisure, but instead, photo shoots are locked away behind in-game pay-walls. Each film cell costs Happy Points, earned by participating in the handful of dreadful mini-games or by exploring small areas and doing what Chibi does best: cleaning and tidying. It's a nod to the series' wildly superior past, but one that doesn't work in this setting, and where previous games made cleaning oddly enjoyable, here it's a chore, a means to a broken end that isn't even worth reaching.

It takes a while to save up for a single silhouette, which makes it even more gruelling when you don't even get anything out of it – limited attempts at each shot mean the dodgy camera can screw you over, while a random element can turn successful shots into failures.

With a central mechanic that barely works and all manner of hoops to jump through before you even get to try your luck, *Let's Go, Photo!* is impossible to recommend. This is a game confused, a novel concept marred by weak tech and one that doesn't benefit from being attached to the cult licence. If anything, it only serves to drag *Chibi-Robo*'s name through the mud, and that's just going to mean a whole lot of scrubbing for the poor little robot.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

F2P BLUES: The grinding required to get anywhere makes *Let's Go, Photo!* feel like a free-to-play game. It'd be far better with just the camera stuff (or just as a proper *Chibi-Robo* game), especially considering that the price has actually gone *up* compared to the US version, which launched in January.



VERDICT 2/10

UNDERDEVELOPED AND OUT OF FOCUS





Above: Plenty of the core series' wacky characters pop up, but usually only to offer you menial tasks to perform for a couple of Happy Points.

YU-GI-NO!

Yu-Gi-Oh! ZEXAL World Duel Carnival

It's always difficult when handling a licensed game. Do you make it for the existing fans, or do you create something that's accessible to everyone but risks alienating the core fanbase? Konami's answer is a third solution: create a product that will annoy everyone.

ZEXAL World Duel Carnival is a baffling release that delights almost as often as it frustrates. First a word of warning though: if you're anything other than a fan of the series, it's best that you keep well away. While Konami has included a tutorial of sorts, it's so well hidden and obtuse that it may as well not be there. Anyone who doesn't have prior knowledge of the card game is going to struggle and it's bizarre that Konami felt such a complicated game didn't need a better explanation for newcomers.

It's a pity that Konami has made *ZEXAL* so impenetrable, as the game itself is very enjoyable, delivering a huge array of cards (over 57,000 in fact) that allow for an impressive range of deck strategies. It even introduces a new type of card, the black-bordered XYZ Summons that made its debut in the *ZEXAL* card game. While it works like a typical tribute, the summoned monsters are attached to the new one instead of going to the graveyard. You can then detach the cards to create powerful effects. It's an interesting mechanic that allows for some powerful decks.

While gameplay is relatively fluid – phases are quickly cycled through and selected with a quick stab of the B and A buttons – things do slow down notably during attacks, or when there are a lot of cards in play. It is understandable, considering the sheer amount of options that are available, but it still grates.

The biggest draw for fans is the *ZEXAL* aspect of Konami's new game. While it's been drastically cut down compared to the Japanese version, there's still plenty to enjoy here. There are over 40 characters to battle, with 11 playable characters, each with their own story arcs that will take a good while to complete. For the most part, AI is nice and varied, ensuring some tough challenges as you reach the finals for each character, while the Free Duel mode lets you play against anyone you've already battled in Story mode.

This last point is an important one, as there is no option at all to battle human opponents, locally or online. This is utterly ludicrous when you consider the interactive nature of the original CCG. While the available characters are varied enough, they're no match for an actual human opponent, making *ZEXEL* feel like a big backwards step for the series.

Konami may have created the most robust digital version of its popular CCG yet, but it has married it to a distinct lack of gameplay modes and player interaction.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: MARVEL TRADING CARD GAME

WORSE THAN: MAGIC 2014: DUELS OF THE PLANESWALKERS

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

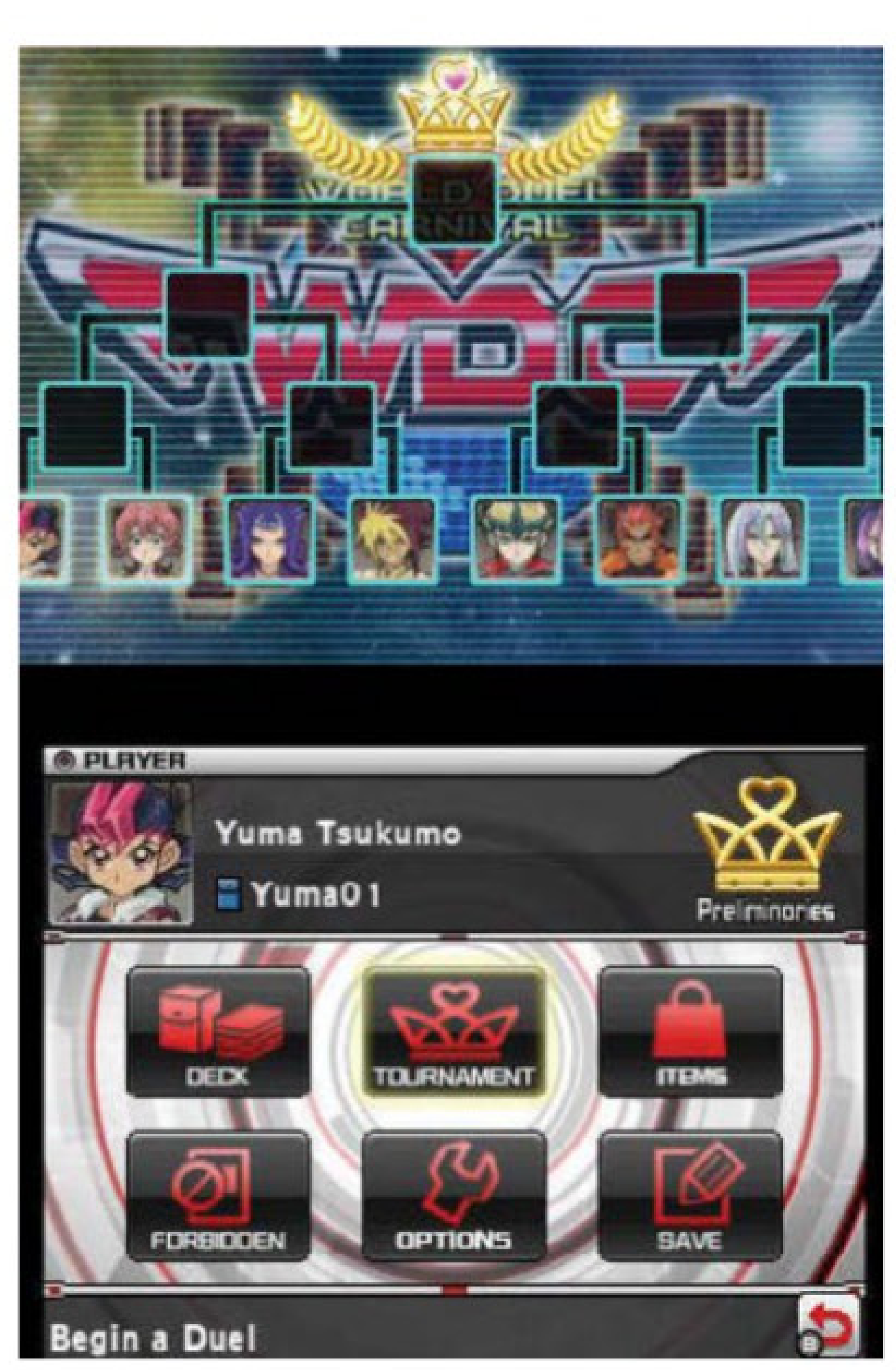
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: Come on, Konami, it's not hard to realise that a game based on a CCG should come with a multiplayer mode as standard.



VERDICT 7/10

SOLID GAMEPLAY MARRED BY ODD DESIGN DECISIONS

Below: Interestingly, you have no idea of a character's skills until you battle them. While we liked this realistic aspect of the game, it becomes frustrating when you find yourself outmatched with no option to quit a game early.





Above: Previous games gave you points for winning duels, enabling you to buy cards or boosters. That's been left out, leaving little incentive to keep playing. Even the locked goodies from the Japanese version are now immediately available.



ALL YOU NEED IS KILL

Killzone: Shadow Fall: Intercept

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Guerrilla Games
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 Online
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

BLACKLIGHT: RETRIBUTION





BATTLEFIELD 4

WORSE THAN

***Killzone: Shadow Fall*'s new DLC *Intercept* feels a bit 'too little, too late'.** The main game didn't help its cause by being staggeringly mediocre and flat out dull in the first place of course, and that's been reflected in the paltry number of users online, most of whom have doubtless stuck with *Battlefield 4* or *Call of Duty: Ghosts*.

If the main game is a donkey at Blackpool pleasure beach, *Intercept* is a shiny new saddle for the donkey to make it all the more comfortable, but everyone's moved on down to the Dodgems.

It's sort of a shame, as *Intercept* is decent enough. There are four maps, with six more (absolutely free) on the way, and it brings co-op multiplayer to the proceedings. It's basically a riff on *Gears of War*'s Horde mode with *Halo*'s King of the Hill territorial control thrown in for good measure, and it's fairly engaging, as long as you're teamed with three other people that won't throw a wobbler every time you cock up.

You get different character classes too, which adds a bit of variety. There's the typical run and gun assault, but then you get the marksman, who hangs back from the shadows, sniping away. The Medic meanwhile is pretty self-explanatory, applying the magic sponge to downed comrades. The final variant is the technician. He lays down turrets and nips off behind some cover with a cup of tea as he watches his kill count go up.

Although it must be stated, *Intercept* isn't about you. *Intercept* is about your team, so everything you do goes towards your team's score. In fact, you need to occasionally run back to home base and bank any points you've scored, before returning to your trigger happy ways.

Intercept's an improvement over the lacklustre main game, but arguably, it's not enough to get people hopping back on the bandwagon. The four maps get repetitive, and bouts can become drawn-out. There are still paltry numbers online too, and frankly, there are better offers elsewhere. Going back to dry old *Killzone* after the Nazi mangling brilliance of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* feels like a drop off, and *Battlefield 4* does multiplayer shooting far better anyway, with more bells and whistles and destructible environments.

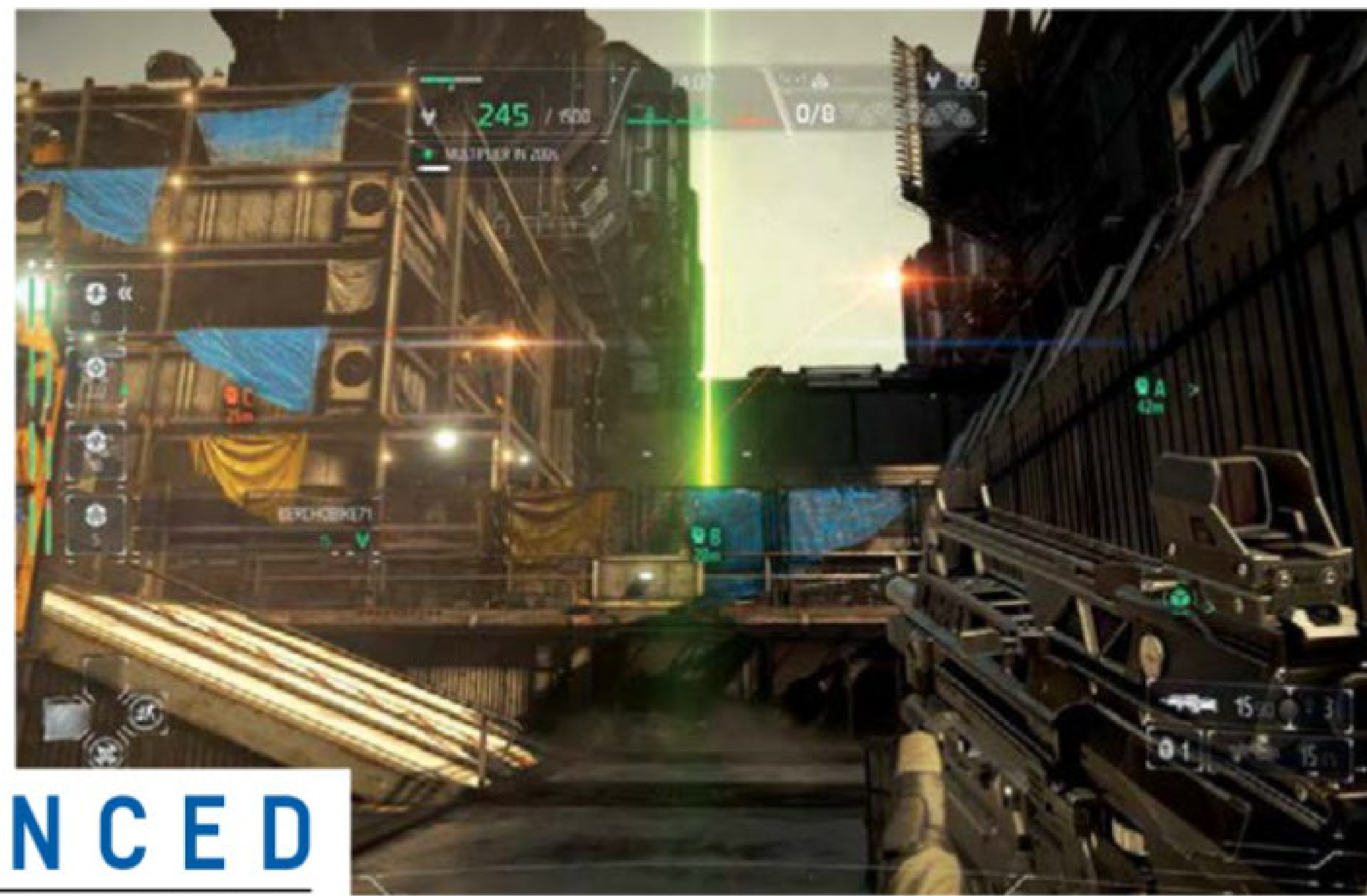
Intercept is getting a standalone release soon, which might boost traction online. As it stands at the minute though, it's a merely serviceable afterthought.

VERDICT 6/10

DESPITE ITS STRENGTHS, THIS FEELS TOO LITTLE TOO LATE.



Above: For all its faults, *Shadow Fall* was the dictionary definition of a looker, and *Intercept* shows this off further with some pretty impressive looking levels in which to unload clip after clip.



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ON THE FRONT LINE: *Intercept* is much more enjoyable than the base game or multiplayer, and holding the line with three other comrades is a lot more enthralling than sneaking around its dull world.



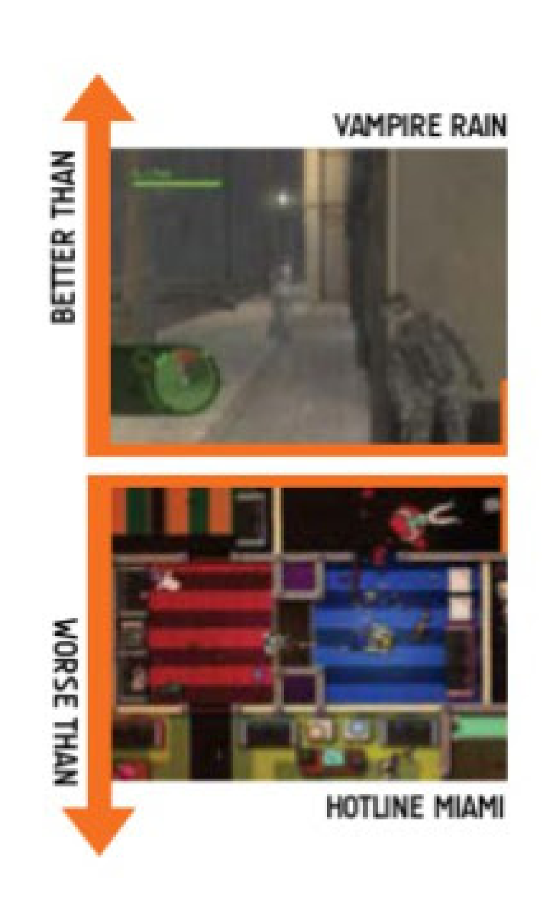
Above: You get bonuses for plugging in power nodes into a contraption at the main base, which gives you access to all sorts of lovely power ups, like miniguns and jetpacks. You can never go wrong with a jetpack in a first person shooter.

A BIT LIGHT

Light

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: Just a Pixel
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual core CPU; 2GB RAM; Intel HD Graphics 3000, Nvidia GeForce GT 7800 or ATI Radeon HD 4800 Series.
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



It's unfortunate for *Light* that it so easily evokes comparisons to a game that outclasses it in every department. With its top-down view that facilitates scouting of enemies and their patrols, its demand for fast reactions coupled with careful planning on the player's part, a focus on refining runs with fast restarts and its electronic soundtrack, *Light* brings to mind *Hotline Miami*.

In fairness to *Light*, most games would struggle when held up to that particular title, so before we're too harsh on it, it's worth nothing that despite the similarities between the two games, *Light* is something of a different prospect. Visually more abstract than its comparator, *Light* is also mechanically distinct in the focus that it places on stealth. While it's possible to take out guards, they are dangerous and will swarm you if you raise the alarm, so keeping a low profile is encouraged.

While there is always a narrative justification for what you are doing in *Light*, each level essentially tasks you with grabbing a few items that will give you some insight into the game's narrative and then getting to the level's exit point. In doing so, the player will need to engage in disappointingly shallow hacking that allows them to open locked doors and turn off security cameras and can disguise themselves as guards in order to reduce the vision cones of enemies and move around a level more freely.

Like *Hotline Miami*, much of the fun in *Light* is to be gleaned from refining your approach to a level after multiple retries, gradually getting to grips with the stage's layout and the most efficient way to move through it. However, while *Light* can be enjoyable in that respect, the foundation of the game just isn't strong enough to keep that loop of repetition and refinement compelling, nor to give you the sense that the game is anything but a functional distraction by the time you finish it.

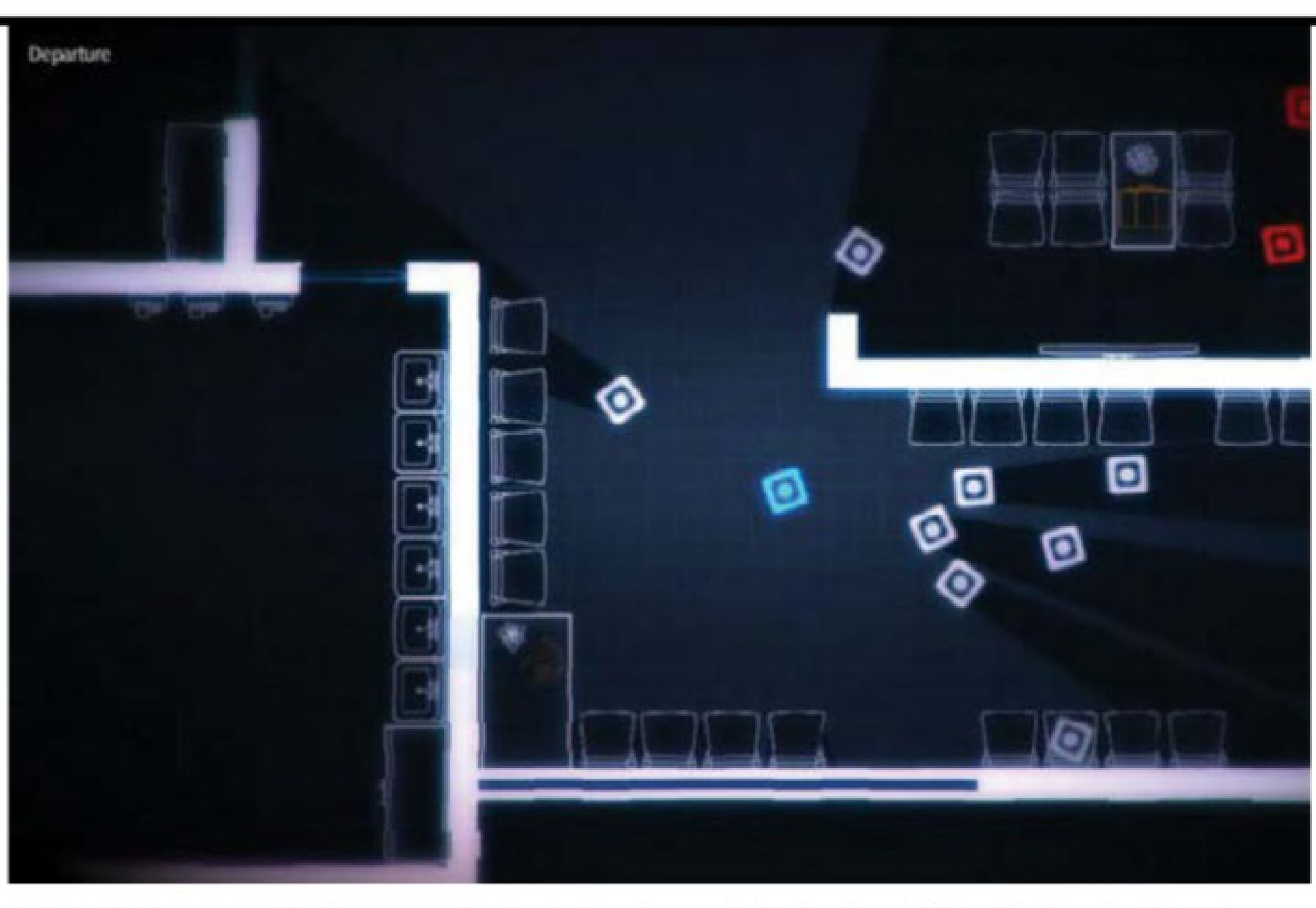
The game's mechanics never come together in a way that makes the game truly exciting and the level design fails to create a sense that there's any creativity in the way that the player finds solutions. When the game tries to open up its levels, it just starts to feel aimless and even a bit bewildering. This means that there's little compulsion to replay stages and that's a significant problem, given that the game can be completed in less than an hour.

You get the sense that the team that created *Light* is capable of more, but *Light* ends up feeling like a proof of concept, an unfinished prototype with some decent ideas that either lack depth or don't quite hit the mark. Ultimately, strong aesthetics can't compensate for that.

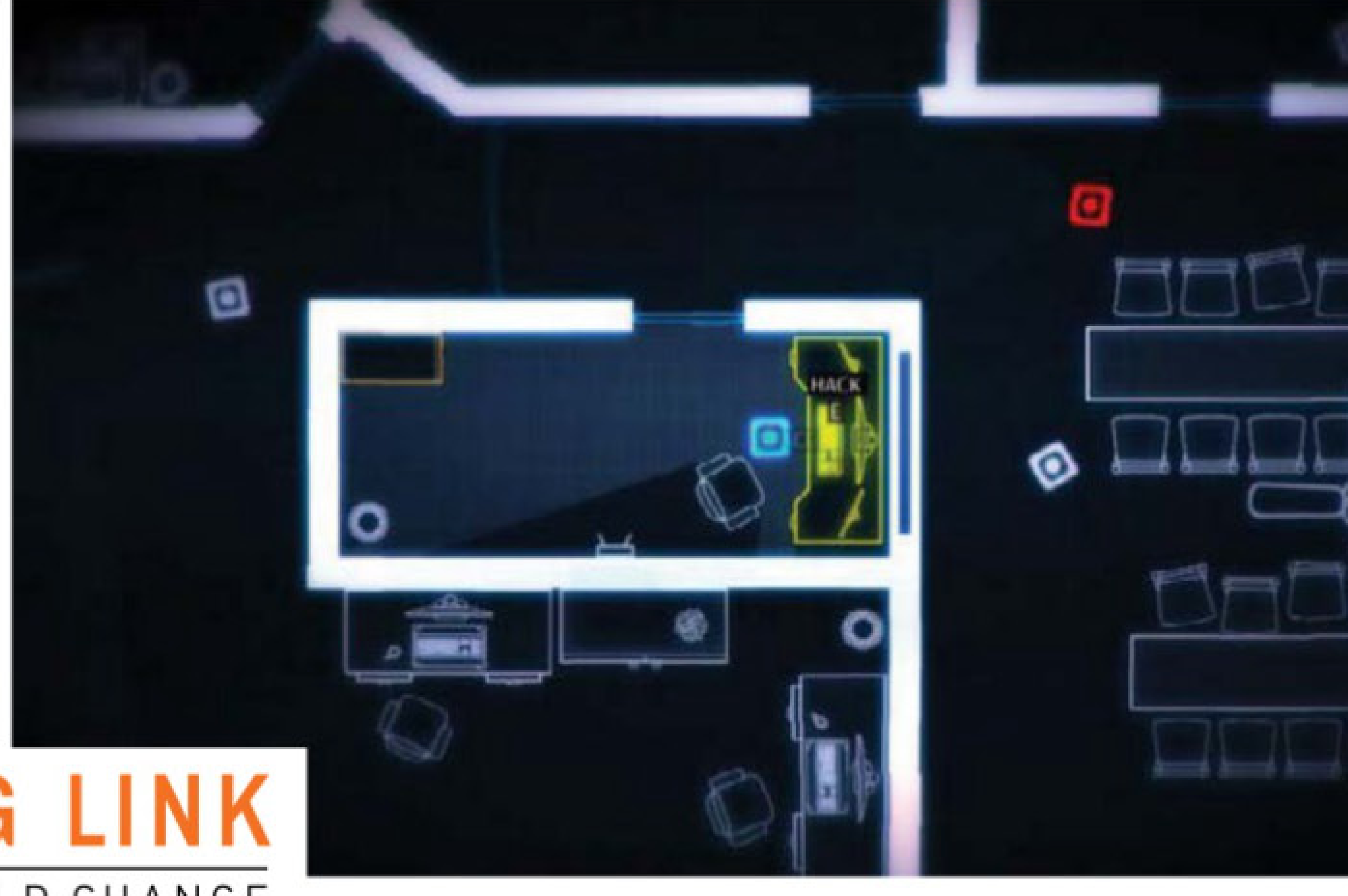
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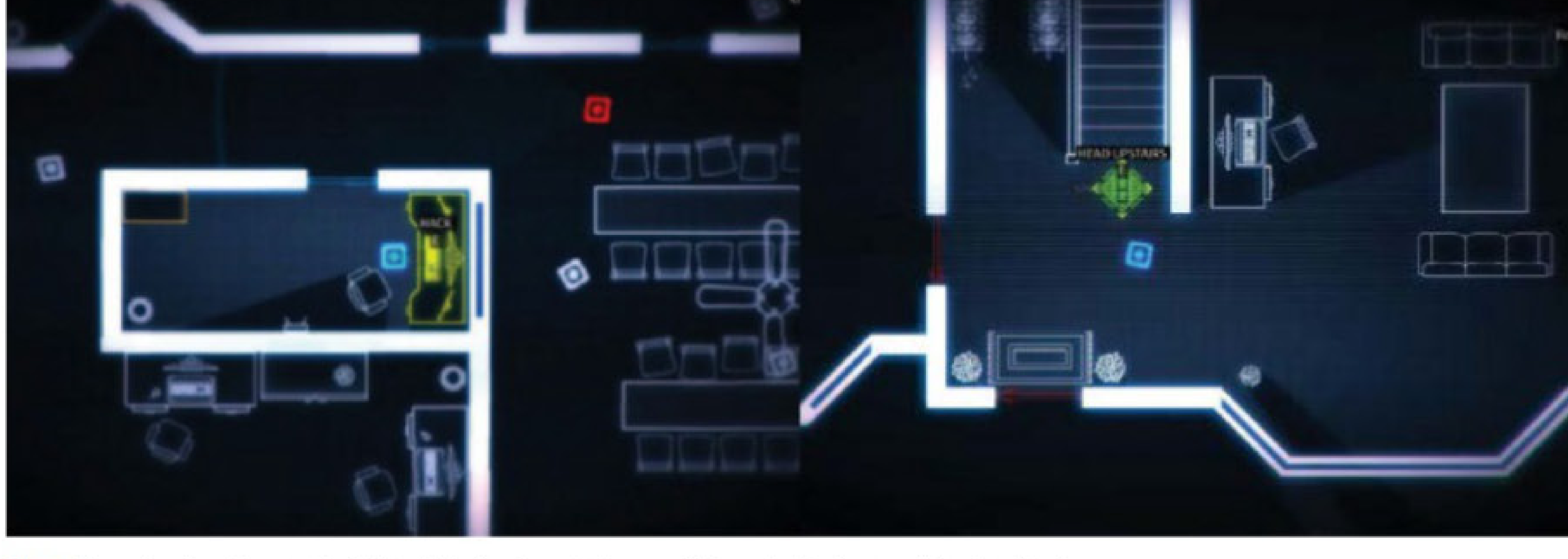
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PLAYING THE SYSTEM: It would be interesting if *Light's* hacking mechanic allowed you to mess with the guards by turning systems against them. As it turns out, the hacking system is pretty dull.



Above: *Light* is not graphically spectacular, but it does have style in the form of blueprint-like visuals and a good electronic soundtrack. That style can't match up for the game's lack of substance, though.



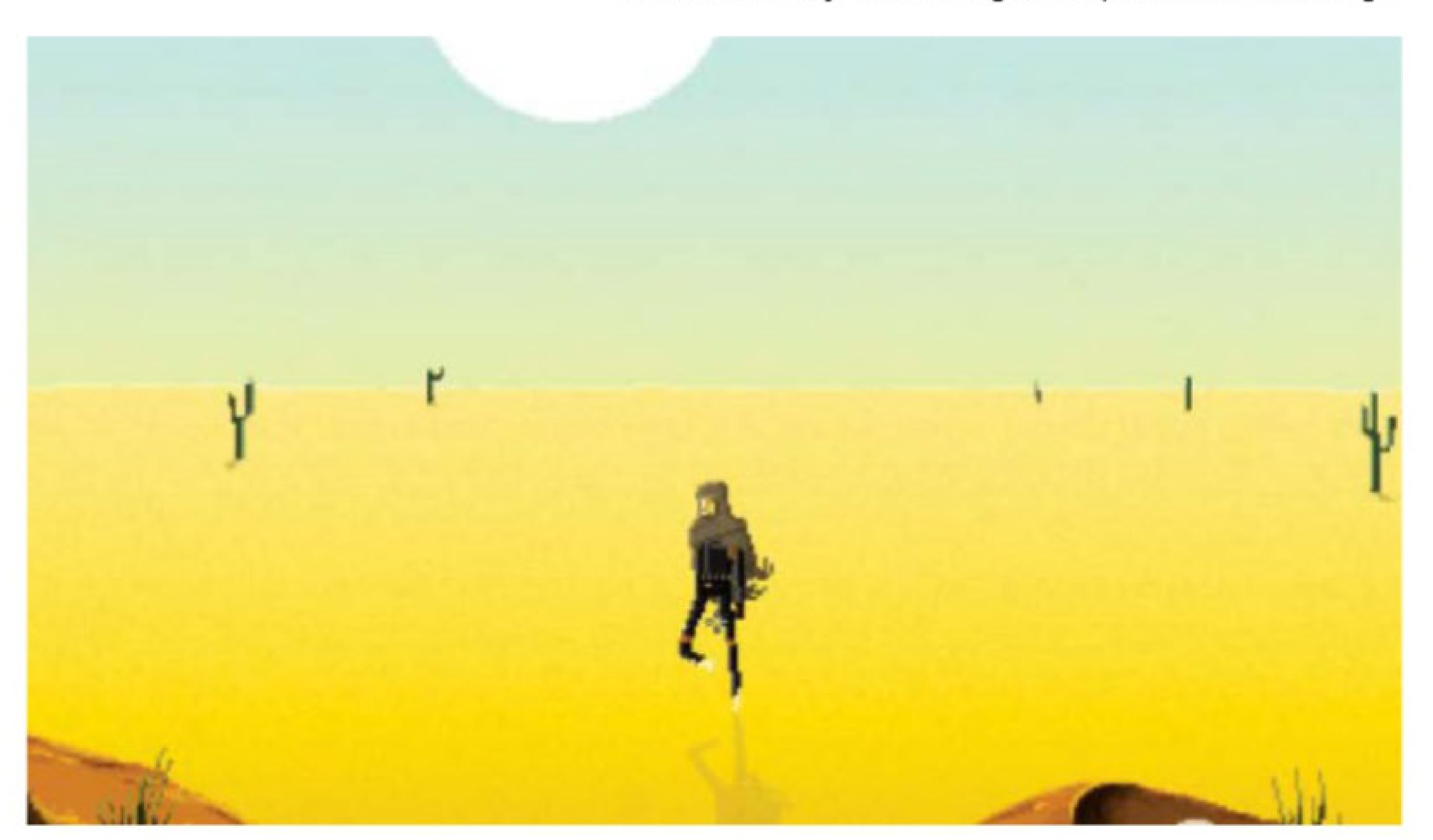


Above: There's a hacking mechanic in *Light* that's reminiscent of *Gunpoint* in the way it's visualised.

VERDICT 5/10

LIGHT'S POTENTIAL FAILS TO SHINE THROUGH

Below: 'Easy' mode will still give you a tough time, allowing you to experience the twists and turns of the story without so much keyboard smashing. Don't expect a smooth ride, though.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Mac
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Deconstructeam
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows Vista/7, Processor: Intel Core Duo or faster, Memory: 2GB
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

MURDERED: SOUL SUSPECT





WORSE THAN



BROKEN AGE

LORD HAVE MERCY

Gods Will Be Watching

Ruthless, brutal and merciless, *Gods Will Be Watching* is best described as a stress simulator. Over the course of seven brutal chapters, you will be pushed to the limits in hopeless scenarios, struggling to fight off the despondency of your team. Unfortunately, it's as much fun as it sounds.

Your role is to point and click your way through various disasters, varying from high pressure hostage situations to long arduous periods of torture. The game is not afraid to go to some dark places, and the beautifully crafted pixel art does not diminish from the unsettlingly mature tone.

You'll soon find out that every click counts and that failure comes in many guises. Progress is made only through discovery and experimentation, and already tense settings are amplified by the knowledge that one wrong decision can send a finely-balanced situation spiralling out of control.

The impending sense of disaster throughout initially makes this a morbidly enticing prospect. That is until you realise a lot of success relies on dice rolls, and that there's only so much control you have over your destiny. It takes repeated play throughs to glean the subtle visual indicators that can help inform your decisions, but most of the time it's tough to know where you stand.

The goalposts are moved without warning, so that survival is snatched away from you just as it's looking faintly achievable. It often comes down to trial and error, admittedly a technique that will appeal to those with a retro inclination. Once a pattern is found, it's usually a case of rinse and repeat for the entirety of a chapter, and when failure can mean losing the last hour's progress, it's hard to see anyone enjoying the process outright.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

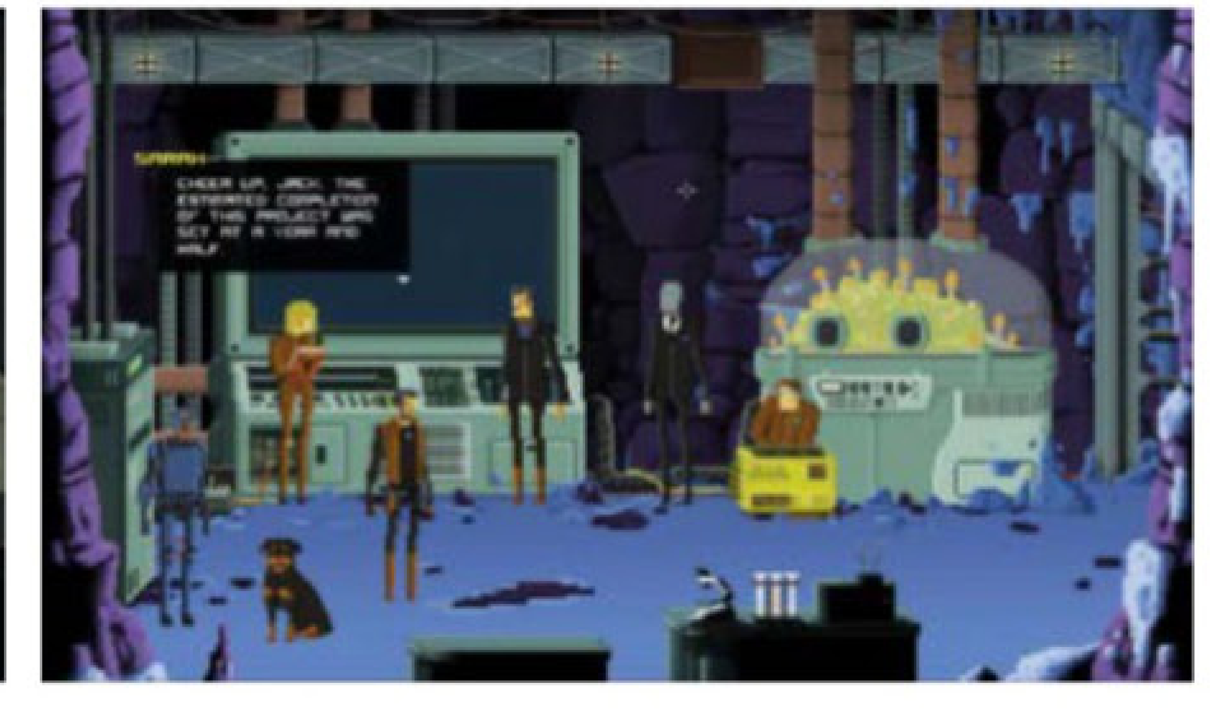
SAVE ME: Though it would soften the intensity of the game, even some infrequent checkpoints really would reduce the frustration. At least an option on easy mode would be nice. Please?

For a game that works so hard to enforce the consequences of your actions, it's strange that when characters die (and they will), they reappear in the following chapter without explanation, as if your friends and colleagues had never spent a second mourning.

It undermines the intention of the developer, and makes the harsh difficulty feel forced and superfluous to the plot. It's a shame, because a saintly amount of patience will yield a well presented, albeit mostly conventional, sci-fi story full of deceit, cyber terrorists, galactic empires and ultimately a smart commentary on the meaning of life for a videogame character. The text is well written and suitably sarcastic in the face of adversity, but simply cannot warrant the gameplay strife beforehand.

There *is* an easy mode, though the game derides you for daring to take the more manageable route. You're goaded into playing on 'original' mode, and it's a trick that will have you cursing the developer's name. Amongst all the pressures flung in your direction, you suddenly realise you've been nursing your own despondency as much as the characters you're controlling.

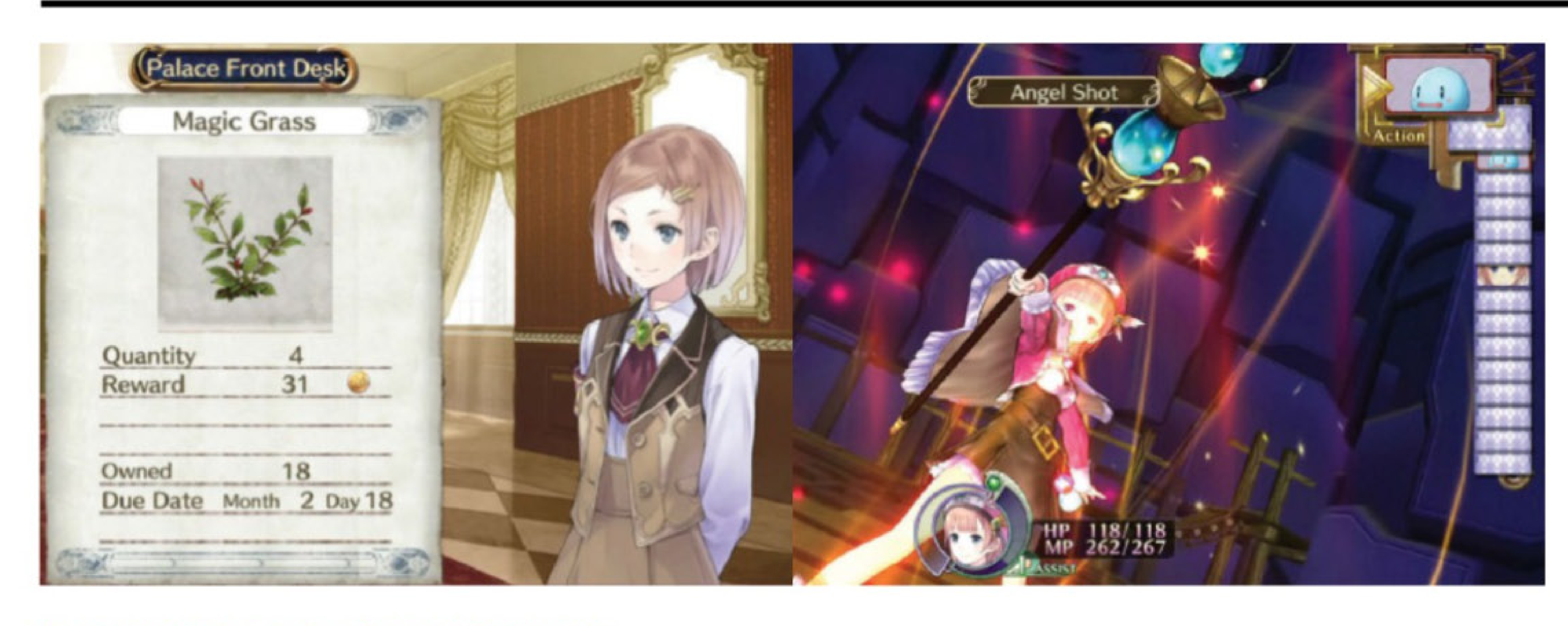






VERDICT 5/10

STYLISH ADVENTURE HAMPERED BY UNFORGIVING DIFFICULTY



Left: The 3D visuals of *Atelier Rorona Plus* are mainly employed in battle and exploration scenes, with dialogue scenes illustrated in 2D visual novel style. It's a curious choice, and one that allows the cut-scenes considerably less impact.

TURNING TIME INTO AMUSEMENT

Atelier Rorona Plus: The Alchemist Of Arland

Of all the resources available, time is perhaps the most precious, simply because it can't be returned once invested – a statement that is as true of *Atelier Rorona Plus* as it is of real life. This RPG's plot centres around Rorona, who is left in charge of her master's alchemy workshop when the local palace threatens to close it down. In order to prevent such a fate, Rorona must use alchemy to craft items for the palace. Each request must be fulfilled within a specified period of in-game time, and most in-game actions have a time cost.

The game quickly settles into a rhythm of its own. In order to make the requested items you need ingredients, which requires trips outside of town. These excursions provide the opportunity to engage in battles. Once you're back in town you can make items for the palace, or you may choose to take on extra requests from the townsfolk in order to acquire money and reputation. While you're doing this you'll often fulfil further request criteria from the palace, which typically include defeating certain monsters or crafting items in order to gain additional items and other boosts.

It's a structure that works well, and perhaps better on the Vita than anywhere else. The constant stream of targets to achieve makes the game perfect for handheld play and, thanks to the game's clear requirements and dialogue recap functions, you'll never be at a loss as to what you're meant to be doing. The result of this design is that you can make meaningful progress during even the smallest amounts of free time. It's evident that time was considered as both an in-game and personal commodity, and this is worth commendation.

Making progress in *Atelier Rorona Plus* drives forward a narrative that is on the lighter side of RPG fare. The titular protagonist is well-known for being slightly dim, her lazy master, Astrid, is prone to winding up her friends, while sword-wielding party members are as useful as those that carry frying pans into battle. It's all slightly twee, but not disagreeable – if you're willing to overlook the rather uncomfortable fan service scenes. Astrid's suggestions that she's made unwelcome advances on Rorona during her sleep are calculated to appeal to a certain type of fan, and unfortunately they're not the only example.

If you can tolerate those occasional dips into this sort of male gaze-based innuendo, which undoubtedly mars the experience, you'll find a solid RPG beneath – mechanically, this is a game that is worth your time investment.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei Tecmo Europe
DEVELOPER: Gust
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: ATELIER MERURU PLUS



WORSE THAN: PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

FAST TRAVEL: A tap of the R button allows travel to any destination, increasing convenience for handheld gamers.

SYNTHESIS: The game's signature alchemic crafting system now enables players to choose between available item traits.

VERDICT 7/10

A GOOD MIXTURE, WITH ONE UNWELCOME INGREDIENT



Above: *Atelier Rorona Plus* manages to achieve a good balance between explaining itself and allowing the player freedom. You'll never be unclear as to how to achieve something.



WHY I ❤...

The Secret Of Monkey Island

JAMES GOLDING, LEAD ENGINE PROGRAMMER (UNREAL), EPIC

“My favourite game ever is The Secret Of Monkey Island *– it’s such a great mix of clever mechanics and intelligent design. It’s funny, too, which a lot of games weren’t back then. It wasn’t ever trying to beat you, either, just entertain you. I think there’s only one way to die throughout the whole game – it was about playing it, rather than it playing you. It felt like such a complete world, too, and few games have made such a compelling and complete fantasy world as that did. I will still find myself humming the music to myself, too, years later. Everything about it just invited you to come and play, and not a lot of games have that any more.”*



"It felt like such a complete world, and few games have made such a compelling and complete fantasy world as Monkey Island did"

JAMES GOLDING, LEAD ENGINE PROGRAMMER (UNREAL), EPIC

RETRO

NO.151

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BEHIND THE SCENES

GHOSTBUSTERS

This year marks the 30th anniversary of one of the most enduring films from the Eighties, but with the title on the cover page reading **games™** rather than **films™**, we look back at the game that accompanied it



Released: 1984
Format: Commodore 64
Publisher: Activision
Developer: In-house
Key Staff:
Design – David Crane
Additional Programming – Adam Bellin
Graphics Design – Hilary Mills
Sound Design – Russell Lieblich

WHEN IT COMES to iconic family films, few decades have delivered more entertainment value than the Eighties. Everything from the perilous escapades of Indiana Jones in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and the DeLorean delights of *Back to the Future* to Spielberg's timeless *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and *that* dance from *The Goonies*. All of these films received videogame adaptations – one of them to the detriment of the whole industry – but even though most of these games amounted to little more than interesting curios at best and landfill fodder at worst, there was still the odd glimmer of light in a sea of mediocrity.

Released on 7 June 1984, the original Ghostbusters film is as much a part of Eighties culture as The A-Team, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and The Smiths. Its refreshing mix of comedy and supernatural shenanigans set it apart from the other summer blockbusters that debuted around the same time and it soon spawned everything from comic books to theme park attractions. But before Bill Murray's quips and Ray Parker, Jr's theme made it on to the silver screen, a deal was struck between Columbia Pictures and Activision to make a Ghostbusters game that would launch alongside the film.

The man who would make this Ghostbusters game a reality was none other than David Crane, the creator of *Pitfall!* and one of the co-founders of Activision alongside Alan Miller, Bob Whitehead, Larry Kaplan and Jim Levy. Crane worked at Atari for two years from 1977 to 1979 and was first credited on Outlaw for the Atari 2600, but far from entering the industry as a programming novice, he already had experience in games development. "Outlaw was the first videogame I published," Crane reflects. "But I had designed games for years before that – including an unbeatable Tic-Tac-Toe game computer. I was also a pinball wizard and mastered all the early arcade games."

Despite a love for pinball tables and arcade sticks, Crane's primary hobby was tennis. "When I graduated and took a job at National Semiconductor in one of their Silicon Valley chip design divisions, I moved into an apartment complex in Sunnyvale, California that had tennis courts," Crane continues. "One of the other tennis players at that complex was Alan Miller, who was working at Atari. One night after an evening of tennis, Alan showed us an ad he was working on that was to be placed in the newspaper. He asked me and the others to critique the language."

What began as a post-tennis proofread quickly became an opportunity to break into the games industry. "Atari was hiring game designers for the 2600 and the job looked interesting," Crane recalls. "That night I typed up a resumé on a computer that I had built from scratch. I interviewed at 10am the next morning and got a job offer by 2pm. Over the next two years the four game designers who ended up founding Activision grew into a close working unit. When Atari failed to appreciate that the four of us accounted for 60 per cent of their game cartridge sales we left to form Activision."

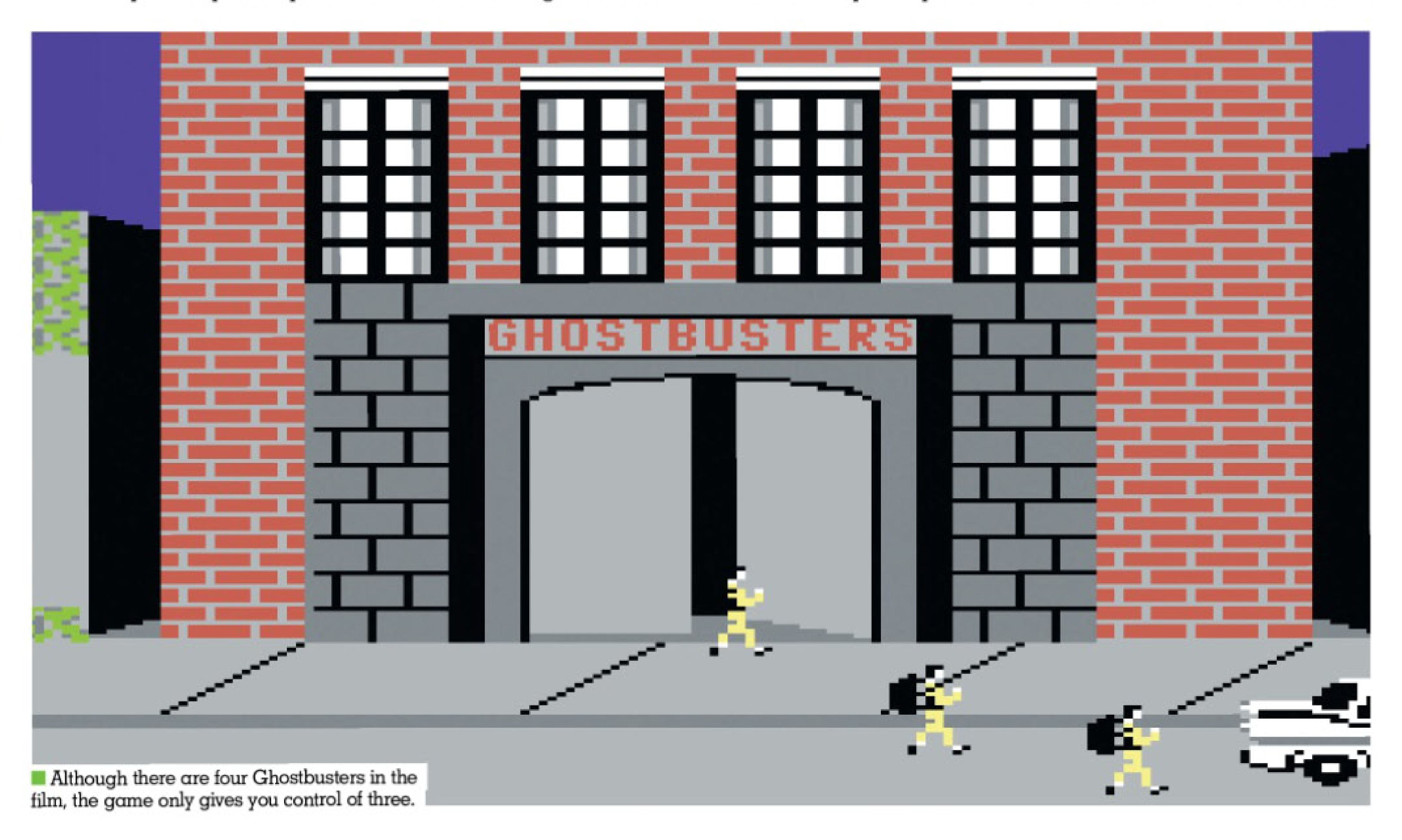
I INTERVIEWED AT 10AM AND GOT A JOB OFFER BY 2PM

The rise and fall of Atari is something that has been discussed at length in these very pages – particularly by former Retro columnist, Howard Scott Warshaw. But when Crane and company severed ties with Atari to become the industry's first third-party developer, they made sure that designers and programmers got credit for the games they created. This led to the Activision instruction manuals having tip sections where the creator could offer the player advice. *Pitfall II: Lost Caverns*, for example, featured some helpful quotes from Crane. These included:

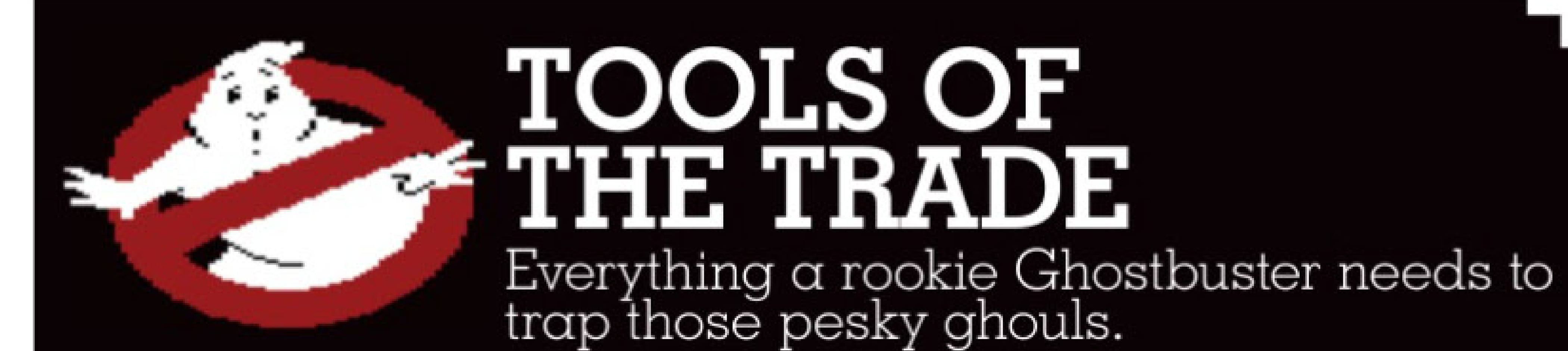




David Crane: he ain't 'fraid of no crippling production deadlines.



Although there are four Ghostbusters in the film, the game only gives you control of three.

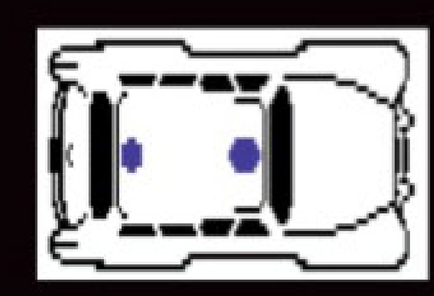


TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Everything a rookie Ghostbuster needs to trap those pesky ghouls.

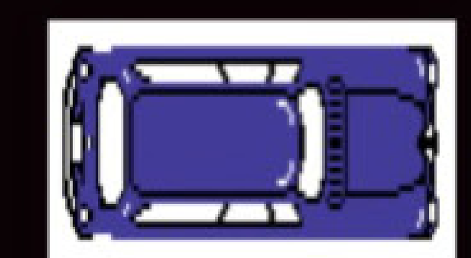
COMPACT ($2000)
Considering you start the game with $10,000, this VW Beetle is reasonably priced. But with a top speed of 75mph and only room for five items, it may be a case of false economy.

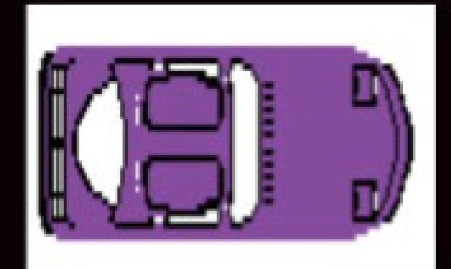




1963 HEARSE ($4800)
What better way to deal with the undead than with this classic coffin courier? It's slightly faster than the Compact, has room for nine items and has the authentic look of the film's iconic vehicle.

STATION WAGON ($6000)
With a top speed of 110mph and the highest loading capacity in the game, *Ghostbusters*' Station Wagon is arguably more practical than the flashier High-Performance for nearly half the price.





HIGH-PERFORMANCE ($15,000)
If you want to afford this pimp-mobile you'll probably have to play through the game more than once. It can only carry seven items but it's no slouch at 160mph and zips through the streets of NYC.

PK ENERGY DETECTOR ($400)
This inexpensive device will keep you informed of the city's PK Energy level. It basically lets you know how much time is left before the Keymaster and Gatekeeper get it on in the centre of the map.

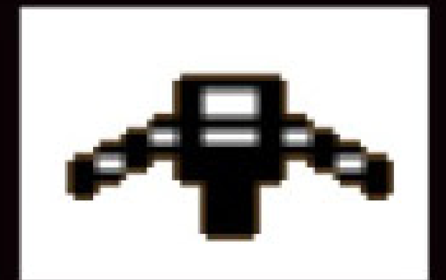




IMAGE INTENSIFIER($800)
Makes the Slimers appear less distorted when they appear. Not essential to getting through the game, but certainly a useful device when it comes to the trade of ghost busting.

MARSHMALLOW SENSOR ($800)
This gadget gives you some warning of when a Marshmallow Man disaster is about to happen. That's something you need to know about as he'll crumple half the city before you can say 'tea cake'.

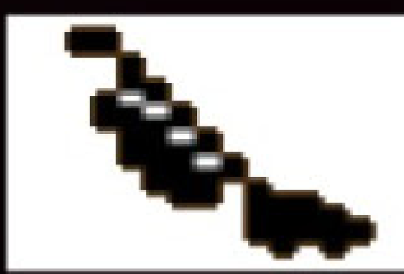




GHOST BAIT ($400)
This is the only item that can stop the Marshmallow Man from destroying a city block. It has multiple uses and you get $2000 for every successful defence. A nice little earner for the business savvy.

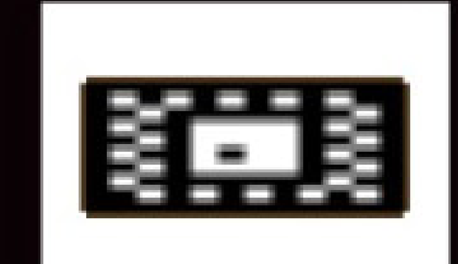
TRAPS ($600)
Without Traps you can't catch ghosts. Simple as that. Ideally, you need to be equipped with at least three so you can stay on the road for longer without having to go back to HQ and restock.





GHOST VACUUM ($500)
As you drive between buildings you can suck up a wandering ghost with this Poltergust 3000 precursor. This slows down the build-up of PK Energy and makes for a fun mini-game in of itself.

PORTABLE LASER CONFINEMENT SYSTEM ($8000)
Better keep a lid on this one! As the second most expensive item available in the game, the PLCS is clearly a luxury. It handily empties all your traps automatically but isn't a necessity.



"don't get discouraged if a bat gets you whenever you go from a ladder to a gold bar."

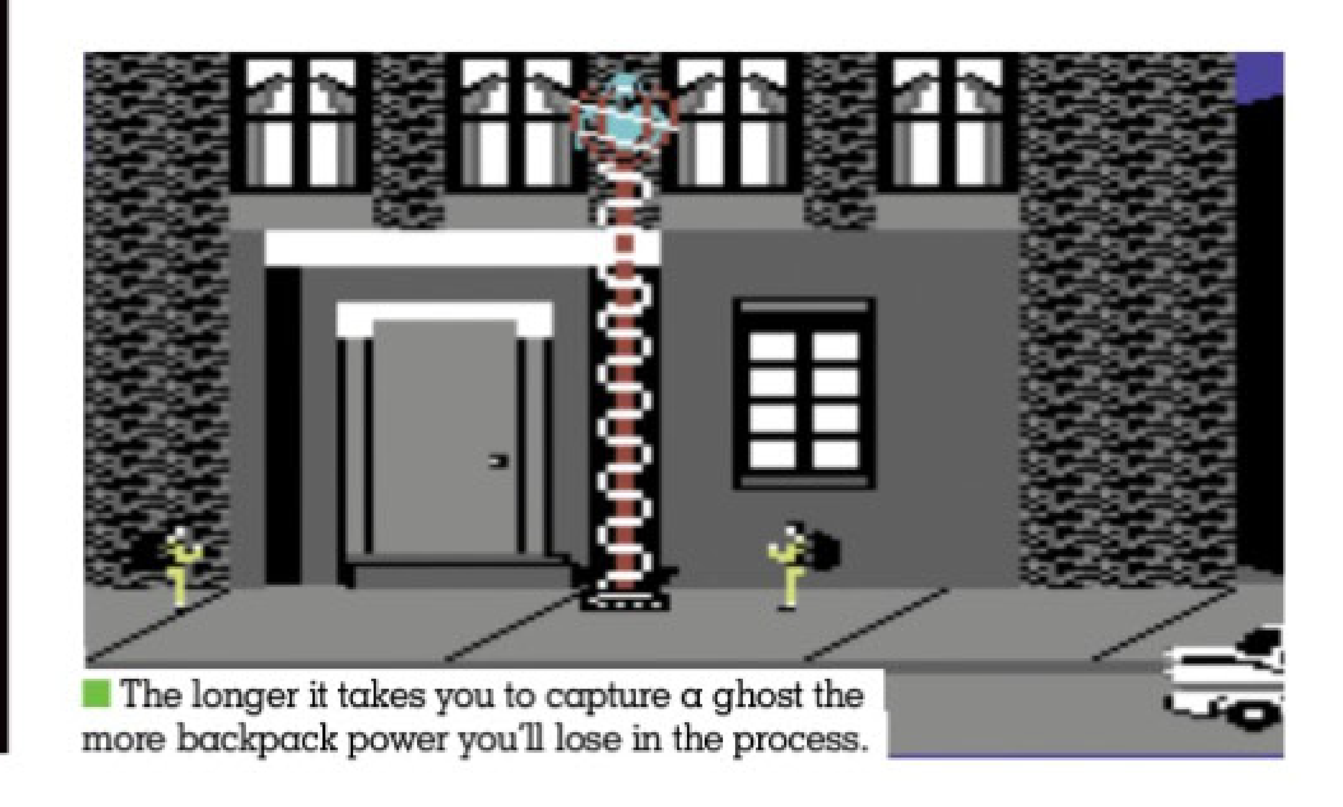
The 1984 *Pitfall* sequel was the last game that Crane worked on before setting his sights on the Commodore 64 and *Ghostbusters*. "There had been some spectacularly failed attempts by other companies to make a videogame with a movie tie-in," Crane confirms with a knowing look. "But the categories were such a good fit that Activision had people reading scripts, hoping to find the right combination. Tom Lopez [former Vice-President of Editorial Development] brought the Ghostbusters script into the lab because he thought it was going to be popular. We all read it and agreed."

Seeing merit in the script was no guarantee that the film would be a hit, but regardless of whether it was a flop or not, the pressing concern was the looming release. "A game with a movie-theme has to be on the market while the movie is still hot, which means while it is in theatres," Crane stresses. "That meant making a game with a terribly short development window, which has always been the kiss of death in games. I saw that I could make it happen if I re-tasked game code I had been working on for six months or so, and I accepted the challenge."

That game was an automobile action title that was originally envisaged without proton packs in mind. "*Ghostbusters* would never have happened if not for *Car Wars*," Crane reflects. "In a sense, *Car Wars* gave its life to make *Ghostbusters* possible. It was a game where players equipped their cars with various weapons and then battled head-to-head on the highways. It would've been one of the first action games with an in-game economy. *Car Wars* gave *Ghostbusters* the economy, the car customisation and the driving scene where the player could vacuum up ghosts. New screens included the city map and the ghost capturing screens."

Playing *Ghostbusters* on the Commodore 64 today, it's impressive just how much content Crane managed to piece together in such a short space of time. You begin the game by taking out a loan for your new ghost-busting business, and after stocking up on necessary equipment and one of five vehicles – including the Beetle-like Compact and a 1963 Hearse – you have to keep an eye on the city map for paranormal activity. When one of the city blocks starts flashing, you have to capture the offending ghost by carefully manoeuvring two Ghostbusters armed with proton packs before releasing a trap.

If you succeed, you'll earn money that can be spent on better vehicles and improved ghost-busting equipment, but if you activate the trap at the wrong



The longer it takes you to capture a ghost the more backpack power you'll lose in the process.



The window for dashing between the Marshmallow Man's legs is incredibly tight. Thank God for modern save states!





All you have to do is stop the 100ft Marshmallow Man from getting in the fridge.

Your 64, Issue Six February 1985

time or make the mistake of crossing the streams, you'll get slimed and lose a Ghostbuster for your trouble. You also have to make periodic trips back to Ghostbusters HQ to empty your traps, recharge your batteries and recruit more Ghostbusters. The aim of the game is to earn as much money as you can before the city's PK Energy rating (which rises automatically) reaches its peak of 9999, at which point you have to close Gozer's portal.

One thing that's interesting to note about this tie-in is that it didn't get caught up in the plot. It was more about turning an interesting premise into compelling gameplay. "We had the script, we had some storyboards and we had camera-ready art for logos and such," Crane shares when asked about Columbia Pictures contribution to the *Ghostbusters* game. "We didn't have a licence to the characters' likenesses, so the actors had no stake in what we were doing. The studio left us alone. At the time, Activision was the gold standard in videogames, and we were trusted to make the best game possible."

That being said, no amount of trust between Columbia Pictures and Activision made the limited development time (allegedly six weeks) any less frantic. "I don't remember how many weeks were available, but it was insane," Crane ponders. "In the game business, when you have to work 16-hour days you simply do so. It was worse because I was about to get married and run off on a honeymoon, and the game had to be finished the night before my wedding. If you believe that is it bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, schedule a game deadline at that time and it won't be a problem."

History has it that Crane made it to his own wedding without incident, and although we have no idea who qualified as best man, Adam Bellin deserves credit for keeping Crane sane. "In the last few weeks of the project, a young programmer named Adam Bellin was brought on board to help," Crane explains. "His role was primarily to back me up once I left. He took a crash course on how my code worked and stepped in to write some modules. As of the night I checked out, it was all on him to fix bugs, etc. He must've done a good job."

Concrete sales figures for Commodore 64 games are hard to come by, but considering the Atari 2600 port of *Ghostbusters* sold approximately 450,000 copies, it's fair to say that it was successful both critically and commercially. Even so, Crane still wonders what might've been. "*Car Wars* would've been ahead of its time with many innovative features," Crane muses. "Making Ghostbusters was fun, but I've always felt some regret when I think about all the things I could've done with *Car Wars* given a reasonable schedule. There is little doubt in my mind that *Car Wars* would've been the better game."

One thing that wouldn't have made it into Car Wars was the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. This iconic creature started showing up once the city's PK Energy rating exceeded 5000, and the only way to stop him from destroying a city block was with a well-timed

ACTIVISION WAS THE GOLD STANDARD IN VIDEOGAMES, AND WE WERE TRUSTED TO MAKE THE BEST GAME

Ghost Bait. "The Stay Puft Marshmallow Man was cool so he had to make it into the game," Crane enthuses. "He took up valuable resources but making him a boss and using him as the basis for a little bit of new gameplay helped justify the effort."

The Michelin Man's less traction-conscious cousin also functioned as the game's final boss, although the challenge was no greater than timing a run between his legs as he hopped back and forth. "Victory scenes have always been a problem with limited game systems," Crane contemplates. "All resources, including disk space, RAM, schedule and staffing were constantly shuffled around. We were

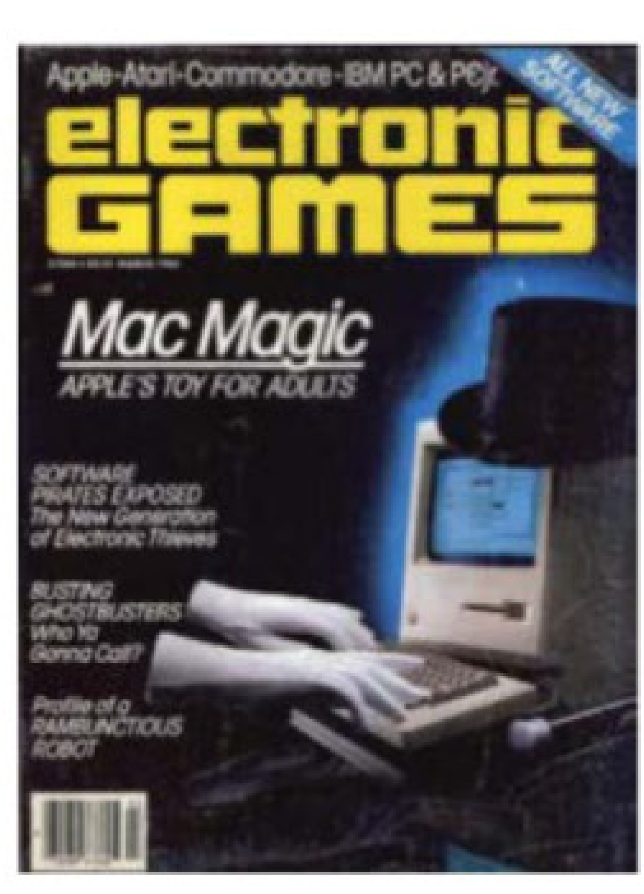
BANK ROLLING

■ Curiously, the aim of the game is less about rescuing the city from paranormal invasion and more about paying back the $10,000 you have to borrow to start up your own ghost-busting business – hardly the journey of heroism Venkman, Stantz, Spengler and Zeddemore endure during the movie. If you make it to the finale without being at least $10,000 in profit, the game will end and you won't get an opportunity to close the portal. The trick is to capture as many ghosts as you can while paying close attention to the Marshmallow Man's whereabouts on the map, and if you finish the game in profit, you'll receive a code that can be used to start again with more money. Entering no name and an account number of 458, for instance, will start you off with a whopping $1,000,000.



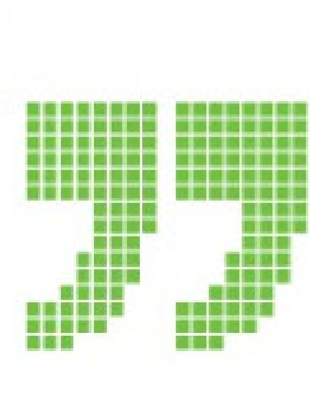


WHAT THEY SAID...



There are few programs more pure fun to play than this one. It substitutes the excitement of living the movie for the ego boost of surmounting a truly demanding challenge.

Electronic Games March 1985



always reluctant to put too many resources into something only seen once, opting instead to dedicate resources to the gameplay. A similar issue would be a big explosion when you crash your ship. Why dedicate a lot of resources to something that you only see when you do something bad?"

It's a question that feels out of time when applied to modern development studios, the kind that invest untold funds and hours into a single set-piece that might only be experienced once per play-through, but looking back at the era when *Ghostbusters* was made, this uncompromising attitude towards gameplay first and foremost is what made sure that Activision's first film tie-in didn't become the next *E.T.* disaster. But now that three full decades have passed since the game's release, are there any secrets that Crane has kept close to his chest after all these years?

"The only thing that comes to mind is how the Gatekeeper and Key Master perform a random turn at each intersection," Crane reveals. "Theoretically, if the random numbers line up they could both reach the temple block shortly into the game and trigger the end game. I locked them out of doing so for some minimum amount of time, after which they could go in. So the length of the game varied randomly beyond that minimum. It was not common for a game to have a defined ending point." But to also have that ending point occur at a random time was pretty much unheard of.

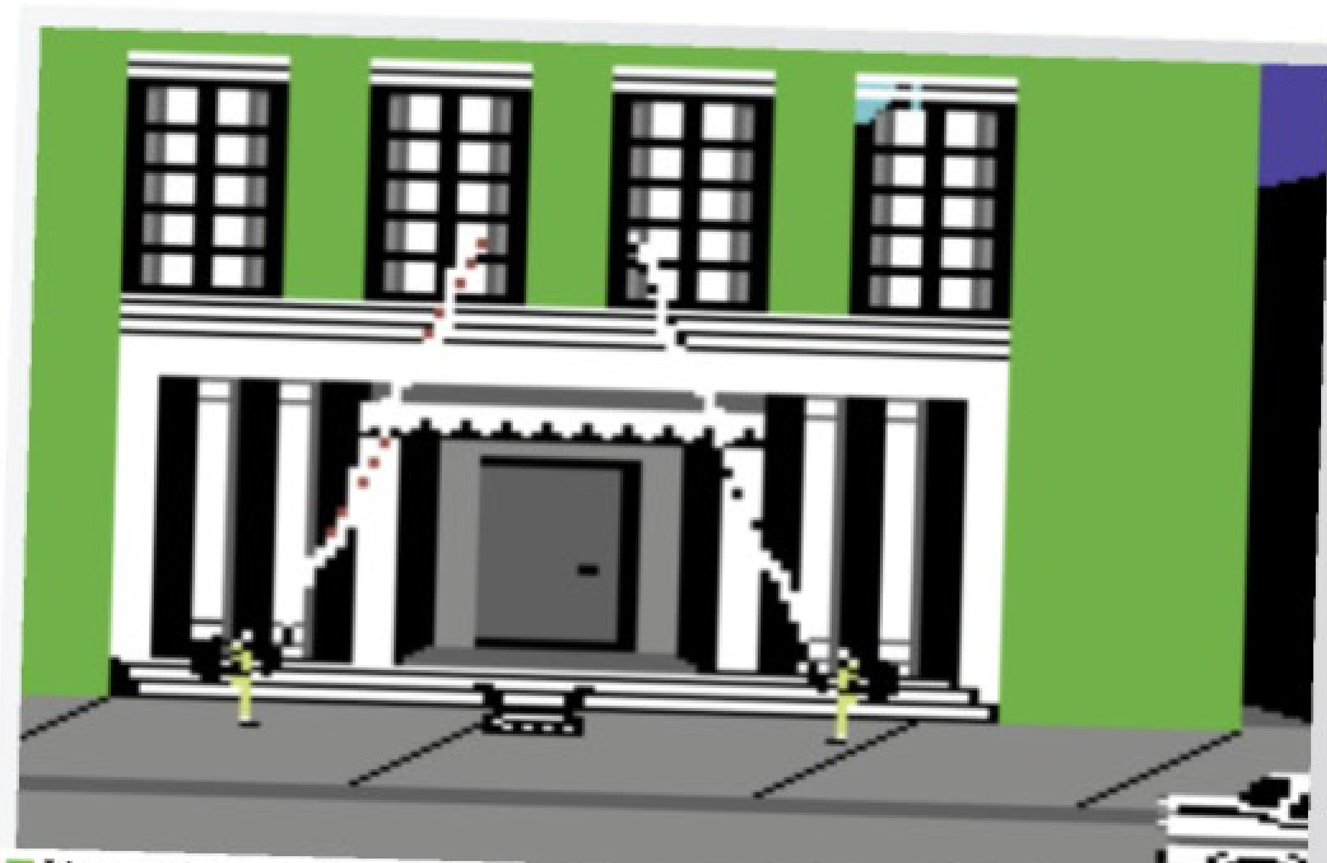
No retrospective on the original *Ghostbusters* would be complete without some mention of the karaoke feature. It busted out the titular song through the Commodore 64's humble SID chip while scrolling through all the lyrics. "Once I had the idea, I felt it had to be implemented," Crane reflects. "I'd developed speech for the Commodore 64, Russell Lieblich [musician and former Activision designer] made a great arrangement of the theme music and Hilary Mills [former Activision senior artist] did a great logo. Those were all so good that I felt they needed to be accompanied by a follow-the-bouncing-ball sing-along."

Most developers would've called it a day at this point but Crane found the time to expand this bonus feature into a makeshift mini-game. "I enlisted the aid of Garry Kitchen and his group at Activision's Eastern Design Centre to program the bouncing ball and scrolling lyrics," Crane explains. "I stole a bit of time away from the game programming to implement the 'Ghostbusters!' yell. That's how the title screen became a playable feature in the game. And before you ask, no, I don't remember who did the yelling."

The spoken speech was limited to just a couple of phrases, the most memorable of which was "He slimed me!" whenever a bust went bad.

ONCE I HAD THE IDEA, I FELT IT HAD TO BE IMPLEMENTED

Crane would push the speech capabilities of the Commodore 64 even further with *Transformers: The Battle To Save The Earth* in 1986, but not before Ghostbusters was ported to other home computing platforms. "I was almost never involved in ports," Crane confesses. "I was off making the next original game concept. When porting, a programmer can use the original game as a perfect specification, and they can find the answer to any gameplay question by simply playing the game."

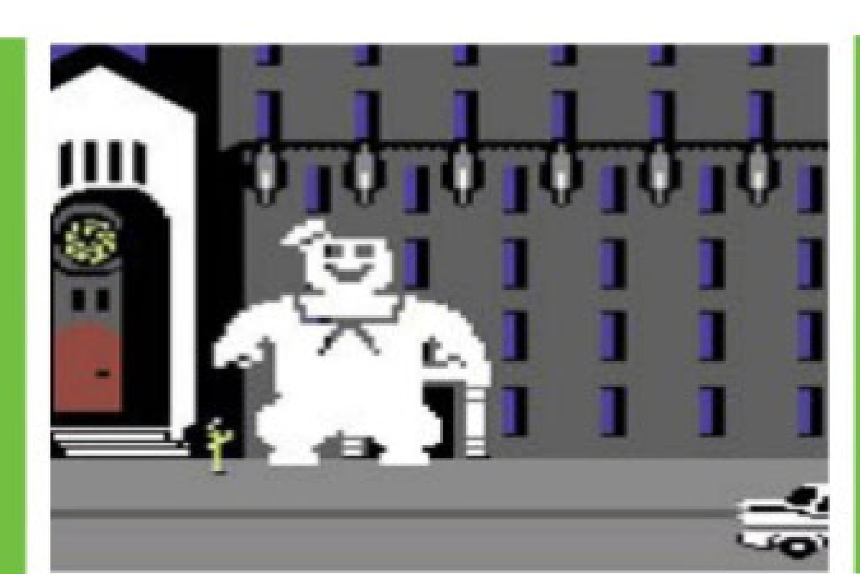

■ It's possible to pincer a ghost between the streams but it's easier just to push them towards the middle of the screen before triggering the trap.

■■■ Looking at the ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC, MSX and Atari 2600 versions of *Ghostbusters* – all of which were released between 1984 and 1985 – it's clear that the ports were handled with a reasonable degree of care. They contained most of the original

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Pac-Man > Ghostbusters > Project Zero



As far as ghosts go, they don't get much more old-school than Blinky, Pinky, Inky and Clyde in the original Pac-Man.



The Marshmallow Man may be a tad creepy, but he's got nothing on the ethereal nightmares in *Project Zero*.



game's features and did a solid job of recreating its presentation. But when *Ghostbusters* was ported to the Master System and NES in 1987 and 1988 respectively, little effort was made to enhance the game beyond some ill-conceived shooting sections. This is especially true of the woeful NES version that received a well-deserved grilling at the hands of The Angry Video Game Nerd back in 2007.

The fact that the NES version was handled so poorly is further testament to what Crane achieved on the Commodore 64. "The Commodore 64 was certainly more capable than the Atari 2600, but it still had limited capabilities," Crane stresses. "The best games were designed to work with the limitations. Enter the movie. It pre-exists with certain expectations. It has characters and storylines that make it what it is. The tendency is to design a game that follows the movie without considering the console's limitations. That's a failure waiting to happen."

Hardware limitations became much less of a problem once the industry pushed past the 8-bit generation and delivered everything from *Dune* on the Amiga and *Blade Runner* on the PC to *The Warriors* and *Ghostbusters: The Video Game* on more modern systems. And yet, film adaptations and tie-ins still account for some of the worst games. "It's far better to step back and design an original game that takes place in the same universe as the movie," Crane states. "You can sprinkle in iconic imagery or props from the movie, but you're designing a game that should be fun to play whether it's a movie tie-in or not."

As far as design methodologies go, it almost sounds like Crane is stating the obvious. But when you look back to the other tie-ins that were released around the same time, there are few instances where the developer put the game before the licence. *Ghostbusters* may've been cannibalised from a vehicular combat game with a novel yet seemingly ill-suited economy system, but by focusing on the concept of the film rather than trying to turn the game into an interactive script, it succeed in doing what so few tie-ins accomplish. It complemented the film and it held up as a game when you looked past the iconic logo.

Following his time at Activision, Crane went on to work at Hasbro Entertainment and co-founded both Absolute Entertainment and Skyworks Technologies. Today he works as an independent game developer, and if he had the opportunity to work on another *Ghostbusters* game, he'd still stick to his principles. "The approach wouldn't change," Crane confirms. "I'd design a game that was fun to play that just happened to involve some aspects of the movie." In the end, that was the secret to a compelling *Ghostbusters* game.



The only time you can buy upgrades is at the start of the game.



Without the aid of the Image Intensifier, the wandering Slimers are harder to spot.



Faster vehicles shorten the time it takes to travel on the road.



The ending sequence feels rushed when compared to the rest of the game.



BEST INTRO

LEGACY OF KAIN: SOUL REAVER
PSONE, DREAMCAST [CRYSTAL DYNAMICS] **1999**

THE OPENING FMV to the first mainstream entry in the *Legacy Of Kain* series proved three things; firstly, that Amy Hennig and her team at Crystal Dynamics had truly arrived as writers in the industry – protagonist Raziel's brooding voice perfectly fit the world of Nosgoth. Secondly, it highlighted the graphical capabilities of both the PSone and Dreamcast: the cinematics remain impressive, segwaying into in-game graphics that – for an open-world game this early on in gaming – were fascinating. Lastly, it proved that a decent soundtrack can go a long way – the gothic-cum-industrial organs and synths combining to sound like something between Nine Inch Nails and Sisters Of Mercy. *Soul Reaver*'s intro was our first true look at Nosgoth, and the labyrinthine narrative that would come to play out between antagonist Kain and his once protégé Raziel.





RETRO INTERVIEW

JASON & CHRIS KINGSLEY

There are many famous gaming siblings, but Jason and Chris Kingsley are two of the most successful. Still running Rebellion 22 years on, we look back at their finest moments

Although they had their roots in the Eighties, the Nineties were far kinder to Jason and Chris Kingsley. Years of freelancing made for a precarious early career but, in deciding to found Rebellion in 1992, the pair have achieved much stability and prosperity since. With *Alien Vs Predator* catching the eye of gamers following its release on the Atari Jaguar and having bagged franchises as varied as *The Simpsons*, *Asterix* and *Star Wars*, Rebellion has gained a reputation as a strong developer-for-hire. But, with the creation of *Sniper Elite*, which launched in 2005, it has also been shown to see the value in its own IP, with this game in particular becoming a popular, well-received franchise. Not that they are likely to rest on their laurels. The brothers have snapped up many smaller developers and they have grown their company into one of the UK's largest…

What got you interested in computing and gaming?

Jason: I've always been interested in games and making up rules in games for others to play. My first memory of gaming is with traditional board games and making variants of them like Nuclear Monopoly. Writing adventure game books came next along with Tunnels and Trolls, a paper-based role-playing game.

Chris: I was always into programming and I built my first computer myself from a kit – it had a whopping 16 bytes of memory and for graphics it had a two-digit hexadecimal display.

Which platforms were of most importance to you when you were younger?

Chris: At home we had an Atari VCS and played a lot of multiplayer games like *Combat* and *Air-Sea Battle*, as well as *Adventure*. We probably played *Space Invaders* the most on the VCS though. After that we got a 16k Commodore PET, and I learned 6502 machine code as I found that BASIC was too slow for arcade-style games – it was all hand-coded though and relative branches had to be worked out on paper. Next came a 48k Atari 800 and *Star Raiders* was a clear favourite. But we both spent a lot of time coding in BASIC, and I coded in machine code and learnt about how the graphics system worked and how to make action games using Player-Missile Graphics – Atari's terminology for sprites. Then there was an Atari ST and this had a fantastic monochrome screen – sharp and high resolution and was much better for long programming sessions.

AS A CONSOLE THE ATARI JAGUAR WAS VERY POWERFUL, BUT COMPLICATED AND TRICKY TO PROGRAM

What prompted you both to create Rebellion in 1992?

Jason: We wanted to make our own games and be able to at least in part influence their direction.

Your first release was *Eye Of The Storm* in 1993 for the Amiga and DOS…

Jason: It was. The team on *Eye Of The Storm* consisted of three people: two



DEVELOPER COMMENTS

“ Jason and Chris are great examples of a pair of talented, creative and very ambitious brothers who set up a UK games company in the late Eighties after graduating from Oxford University. Through their passion, creativity and leadership they were able to grow Rebellion into one of the leading UK game development studios. It's not always been easy, but they are clever guys and have found ingenious ways of navigating the trials and tribulations of an ever-changing industry.

We met them in the late Nineties and became best friends as we realised we shared so many experiences and faced the same challenges. One of our first joint projects, with some other developers too, was to set up the trade industry body TIGA.

When Blitz hit hard times, we turned to them for their support and they were incredibly understanding and helpful for which we and a large number of the Blitz staff are indebted to them. ”

PHILIP AND ANDREW OLIVER – AKA THE OLIVER TWINS



■ The racing game *Checkered Flag* was also an early hit for the company, being created for the Jaguar and the Lynx in a long-standing deal with Atari.

programmers, Chris Humphreys and Al Perrott, and one artist-designer-producer – me. I designed the whole game and created all the 3D graphics myself. The only 3D tools I had at the start were graph paper and a text editor and of course the maximum number of polygons for each object was in the low 10s, so it was a big challenge but it was a great discipline. The one tool I did have was Deluxe Paint which I used for the 2D art and the texture map. To my knowledge *Eye Of The Storm* was the first 3D game on PC with texture mapping and curves in it.

Checkered Flag and Alien Vs Predator came next for the Jaguar. How did you get involved with Atari?

Jason: When Atari announced its new Falcon home computer – basically a more powerful ST – Chris and I went to Atari's offices in Slough to meet with Alastair Bodin and showed him a new demo for a 3D dragon flight game we were working on. Alastair had the biggest office I've ever seen, and he thought the demo was so good that he got Bob Gleadow, the CEO of Atari Europe, to come straight down to see it. Bob then said: "That would be great for our new Jaguar console!" To which Alastair replied: "What new console?" It was the first that Alastair had heard of the Jaguar too. We were quickly invited to visit the Flare guys in Cambridge and got hold of a machine to play with – the Jaguar was designed in the UK so that made it a bit easier for us to get started. We eventually got a two-game contract with Atari for *Alien Vs Predator* and *Checkered Flag*. That was the catalyst for us to move out of our basement office into a proper office, set up Rebellion and to hire some staff to work for us – we couldn't fit enough people in our basement.



■ Jason and Chris Kingsley receive an award from games trade body TIGA in 2005.

Why did it take four years before your next release, *Klustar*?

Jason: We were working on some other games for Atari on the Jaguar – *Skyhammer* and *Legions Of The Undead* – but they were eventually cancelled by Atari, though *Skyhammer* did see the light of day in the end. We also worked on a mad-as-a-brush PC game called *Mr Tank*. Oh, and there were some other titles beside, and then of course we were very busy on *Aliens Vs Predator* with Fox.

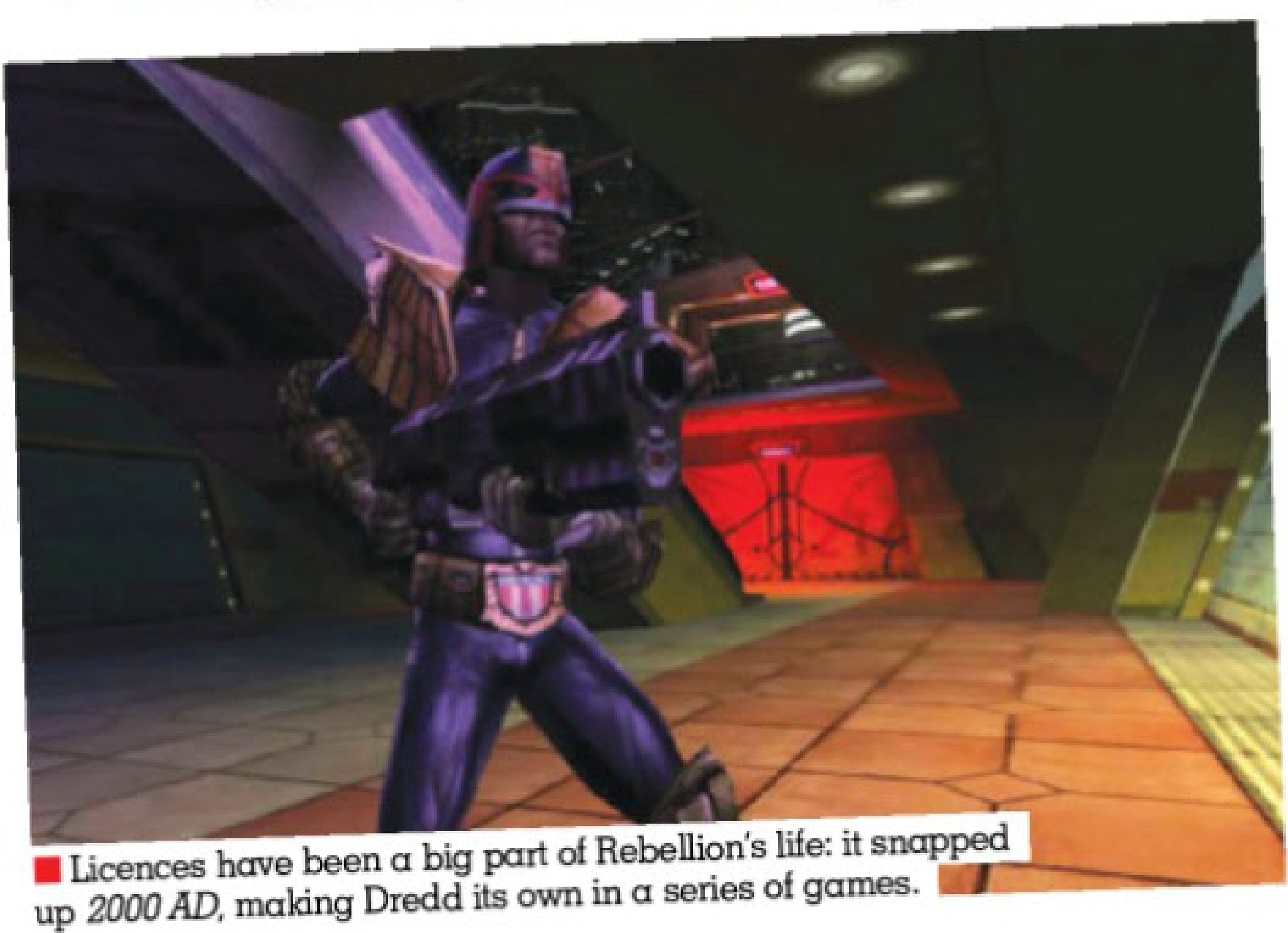
1999 was a busy year – were you rapidly growing at this stage?

Jason: Sometimes game development is like buses – no matter how hard you plan to have a sensible overlap of games with a decent gap between launches they often seem to concertina up and come out around the same time. That was the case with 1999 – it was, perhaps, a defining year for us. We were growing, and learning, and we both had to spend less time making games and more time on making the business work. Our growth at that time was entirely organic and based on our ability to pitch games to publishers; having titles of the quality of *AvP* helped a lot, of course. We were very much in the work-for-hire mindset which, at the time, was great for cashflow but didn't provide much upside.

One of the things we were seeing were a lot of licenses. How did you attract them?

Chris: We had always been big fans of the Game Boy and had worked on various iterations of the hardware over the years. I had put together my own hardware and software tools for the Game Boy from off-the-shelf tools: Dataman's S3 and S4 EPROM programmers and Crash Barrier's METAi assembler development system. Infogrames asked us to work on *Asterix* after we did *Mission: Impossible* on the Game Boy Color for them – that was really fun because we also created some special spy-tools in the game: a message transmitter, a calculator, an address book and an infrared TV remote controller. I think we were the only game to ever use the infrared port on the Game Boy Color. *Tiger Woods* was part of a multi-project work-for-hire deal with Destination Software.

The Noughties was a busy decade too: Rebellion set about snapping up many gaming developers such as Core Design, Strangelite and Awesome Developments...



■ Licences have been a big part of Rebellion's life: it snapped up *2000 AD*, making Dredd its own in a series of games.

Jason: Publishers were resistant to outsourcing so to be successful you had to be big and the only way to do this was to acquire other developers. To a large extent our acquisitions were opportunistic, as some publishers were looking to close them and we didn't want to see them close.

Did it lead to any tension – did any group feel a little put out by the takeovers?

Jason: Most of the takeovers went well but in some cases things just didn't work out. I'd say that for some people a takeover by Rebellion was seen as a good thing but for a few others it wasn't seen in the same light. There's always some level of tension, and in fact that's healthy for development, because you need a range of differing opinions to cover all angles. Ultimately, as a work-for-hire developer, it comes down to the relationships between your development teams and your publishers – it is the publishers that call the shots.

But you were also buying IP. Rebellion owned a fair few publishing companies, acquiring the rights to *2000 AD* in 2000, giving it the rights to *Judge Dredd*, *Halo Jones* and *Strontium Dog*...

Jason: We've always believed in the importance of IP even during the times we were a work-for-hire developer. Buying *2000 AD* got us a lot of notice as more than just a developer and I guess you could say it propelled us into the elite super-developer category – I think it really surprised a lot of people in the games industry. *MCV* said it was 'undoubtedly one of the boldest and most imaginative moves made by anyone in the games business in living memory.' I couldn't have put it better myself!

Did it help you make better games?

Jason: It allowed us to quickly create and test new IPs, learn about alternative ways to tell stories, and develop worlds with detail and depth.

Were you big *2000 AD* fans anyway?

Jason: Yes! We have both been reading *2000 AD* from the day it was launched in 1977. We still remember the Biotronic stickers and the space spinner…

What was your main direction in the Noughties?

Jason: It was a time of significant growth for us, and the industry as a whole. Game budgets were going up but so were the expectations of the players. We were focused on the work-for-hire model and we worked on a lot of licensed titles, but we still managed to create some of our own new IPs like *Sniper Elite*.

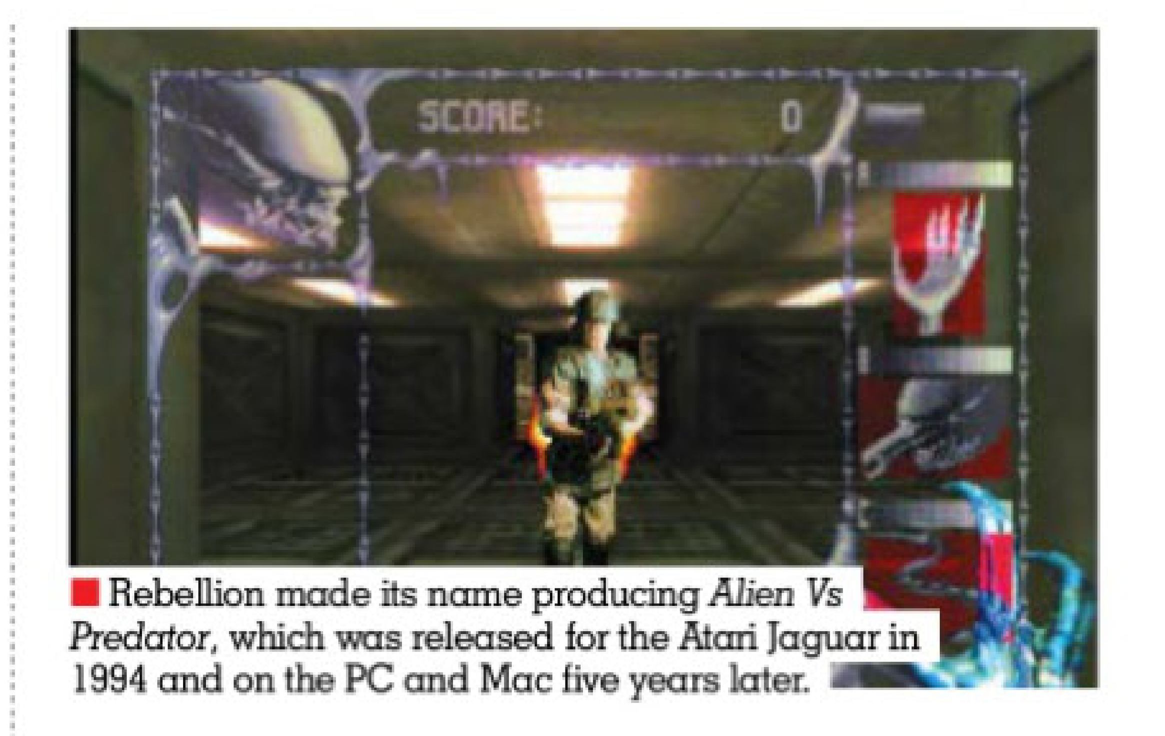
I HAVE TO REPEATEDLY EXPLAIN TO MY US COLLEAGUES THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE TO CALL ME SIR

***Sniper Elite* is big for you right now. Where did the idea come from and were you at all surprised by the success?**

Jason: We're very grateful for the success of the *Sniper Elite* series. The idea has grown from the earliest ideas that were thrown around by the team and others. As we owned the brand, it has meant that we're able to make a new game with similar themes and to build on what we made in earlier versions. *Sniper Elite* is not only big for us as a development studio, but it is becoming a pretty big contemporary games franchise across the world.

How does *Sniper Elite III* compare with the other versions?

Chris: It has a higher number at the end! Seriously it's building and expanding on the positives and addressing negatives of feedback we've received. We've worked hard on the openness of the gameplay and the AI in particular but pretty much everything is bigger and better then before.



■ Rebellion made its name producing *Alien Vs Predator*, which was released for the Atari Jaguar in 1994 and on the PC and Mac five years later.

Have you found yourself becoming removed from the company in any way?

Jason: As the company grew even larger, our roles did change over time, and we constantly had to learn new things. In fact, we are still learning to this day. But that's the nature of the games industry; it is dynamic and fluid, constantly changing and innovating, never standing still.

In 2012, you were awarded an OBE – how did it feel?

Jason: Very pleased indeed and slightly nervous about the ceremony. I also have to repeatedly explain to my US colleagues that they do not have to call me Sir, even though I have my own real and well-used suit of armour.

The gaming industry in Britain is so important to you both that Jason is the chairman of TIGA. How did you get into that role?

Jason: Many years ago, we met with a group of other developers, including the lads from Blitz and Kuju, for dinner at E3. As usual at these sorts of things the talk got to publishers and the industry in general and the way that developers were treated. We all agreed that something had to be done to improve our lot and make the games industry a better place for all. What was different this time was that Chris and I decided to actually do something about it! When we got back to the UK we met with various people in the government, I found Fred Hasson and persuaded him to become CEO of this new organisation, and together with the other founding developers we helped get TIGA going.

What do you feel the UK is bringing to gaming?

Jason: What it has always done: creativity, innovation, technology and vision, along with an appreciation of both the mainland European aesthetic and the North American one. We always seem to have constraints of one sort or another on the titles we create and constraints allow for, and often force, creative solutions.

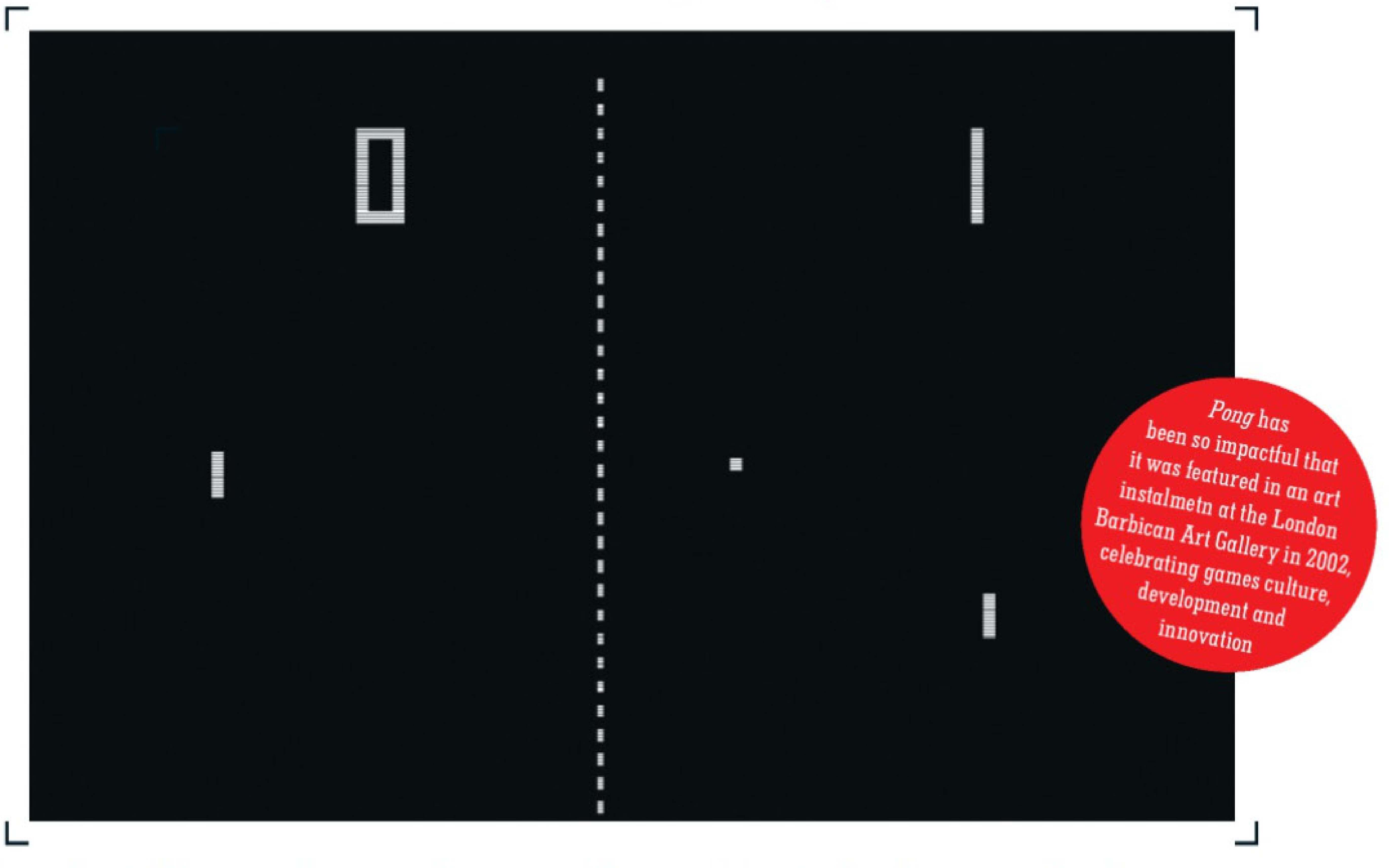
■ Jason roped in television personality and one-time game journo Charlie Brooker to play a small role in *Sniper Elite III*.



GAME CHANGERS

PONG

Released: 1972 **Publisher:** Atari **Developer:** Atari **System:** Arcade



Pong has been so impactful that it was featured in an art instalmetn at the London Barbican Art Gallery in 2002, celebrating games culture, development and innovation

How the table-tennis arcade game that originated in bars and takeaway buildings gave birth to the entire industry we know and love today

WE ALL KNOW *Pong*. The two paddles scrolling up and down the side of the screen, the blip of a ball pinging back and forth between the two players' pads – it's an industry phenomenon, the birth of interactive entertainment, signified with two rectangles, a square and a dotted line. The old adage of 'less is more' certainly works in *Pong*'s favour: it's arguably the most simplistic game out there, yet perhaps the most impactful.

The story of *Pong* is a relatively simple one; it was actually preceded by another coin-operated cabinet called *Computer Space*, a game that tasked players with taking on the role of a pixelated space ship and taking out enemy alien craft. It was difficult for a coin-op, not player-friendly enough to extract enough credits and keep players coming back for more (though it did make over $3 million in cabinet sales), so Atari founders Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney along with programmer Al Alcorn thought up *Pong*, a game that was simple to pick up, competitive, and – most importantly – addictive.

Before *Pong* cabinets captured the imaginations of the mainstream, computer games were the domain of bored computer programmers, of military engineers that had time to spare and access to an incredibly rare resource at the time: a computer. After the release of the Magnavox Odyssey – complete with its own primitive tennis game – Bushnell and his fellow employees at Atari saw the lines these games were drawing in at stores that had the console on-site, and realised that if games like these were made publicly available, on a kind of pay-per-play basis, it would easily draw a profit.

Pong was born, and the game caught on. You could argue it was the birth of social gaming – a collaborative yet competitive effort between two friends, working together, to try and get the highest score possible while attempting to stretch your money out for as long as possible. *Pong* invented arcade gaming as we know it today – it established that there was a market of young people with disposable income that would happily pay money to play games in a social environment. Consoles were still ludicrously expensive – owned by those with a lot of wealth to spare, or those that were lucky enough to get a hold of one of the limited machines manufactured in the first place. *Pong* tapped into the

INDUSTRIAL IMPACT | *PONG* SPAWNED A RANGE OF OTHER STUDIOS THAT WOULD GO ON TO BECOME SOME OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPERS

NAMCO

★ In the beginning, Atari originally had an in-house team working overseas in Japan to localise its games and to build the cabinets that would be shipped around the country. After a certain amount of time, this splinter division of Atari was eventually sold to Namco, and the rest, as they say, is history.

KONAMI

★ Originating as a jukebox rental and repair company in 1969, long-time Konami chairman Kagemasa Kozuki saw the unprecedented success *Pong* was having in domestic and foreign arcades and, over time, transformed Konami into one of the premier arcade machine specialists in the world.



NINTENDO

★ Nintendo, historically a playing card company, had started testing out other markets in 1956, to great success. Ultimately, by 1974, it branched out into videogames, shamelessly cloning *Pong* in one of its first efforts to break into the industry. And as we know, they all lived happily ever after.



ATARI SHOCK

★ As of 1983, the industry suffered from a huge shrinkage due to a recession from $3.2 billion right down to $100 million (a startling 97% drop). This was largely attributed to Atari's meteoric rise, and the industry's inability to keep up with demand in the years after *Pong* broke the mainstream.

common market, the everyday player. It tapped into what the industry would eventually come to call the 'casual gamer'.

Pong was a revelation, shipping 3,500 units in a matter of months, at a time when traditional coin-operated games were only selling under 1,500 units per release. The press of the time became enamoured with the idea of a playable TV program, and there was a jostling among newspapers and magazines to define this new phenomenon: Space Age games, Space Age pinball, TV tennis, TV games, television skill games and video skill games were some of the format labels offered, before popular consensus settled on the videogames moniker that we know and love today.

Pong came to not only be one of the most iconic images of the videogames industry, but also of the Seventies in general – seeping its way into cross-media, with references made to the *Pong* machine in sitcoms, films and literature from the time. *Pong* also launched Atari to international acclaim, drawing attention to the company that would become synonymous with gaming.

THERE WAS A JOSTLING AMONG NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES TO DEFINE THIS NEW PHENOMENON

KEY FACTS

- In the very first iteration of the coin-operated *Pong*, there was a glitch that didn't let players defend the entire side of their field, which turned out to be incredibly frustrating for everyone involved.
- The most recent valuation of *Pong* put the game's overall value at a whopping $78.5 billion, respective of inflation; that makes *Pong* the biggest arcade title to date.
- Bushnell set up Atari during *Pong*'s development, taking the company's name from the Japanese word for 'check' in the boardgame he was obsessed with, known as *Go*.

The simplicity and accessibility of *Pong* slingshotted the idea of interactive entertainment to the masses, breaking out of the humid labs of computer professionals and engineers into the thriving American bars of the Seventies. Due to *Pong*'s relative simplicity to code and create, many junior programmers used the game as a basis to get to grips with creating games, and almost every single format of console has since seen some iteration of *Pong* make an appearance – usually as a test for up-and-coming designers to get to grips with the console's programming language.

It's a success story unique in its inception and impact, a technical and cultural revolution all in one. Without *Pong*, we wouldn't have the industry as we know it today. *Pong* didn't just change the videogames industry, it changed the world.



GAME CHANGERS

"PONG IS THE FIRST VIDEOGAME"

AND 8 OTHER GAMING MYTHS

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS IS THAT PONG IS THE VERY FIRST VIDEOGAME (THAT HONOUR GOES TO TENNIS FOR TWO IN 1958). WE'VE SNIFFED OUT EIGHT OTHER POPULAR MYTHS AND DEBUNKED THEM FOR YOUR READING PLEASURE



'THERE ARE MILLIONS OF GAMES CARTRIDGES IN THE DESERT'

AS WE DISPROVED in our last issue, there aren't actually millions of Atari cartridges buried deep under New Mexico; rather, there were only a few hundred *E.T* cartridges that Atari dumped there after no-one would buy them… because the game was so bad.



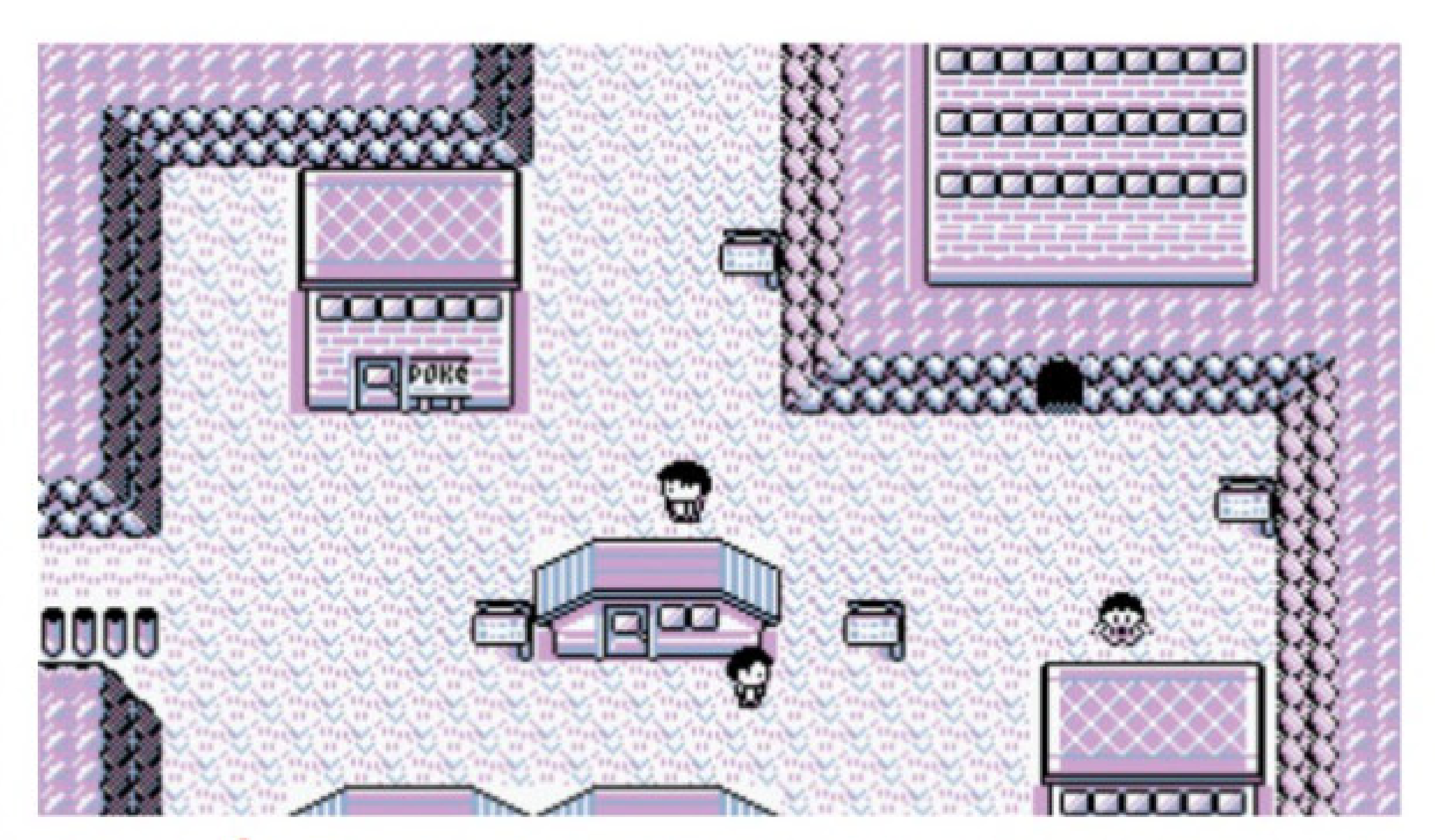
'YOU CAN GET LARA NAKED IN TOMB RAIDER'

A MYTH PERPETUATED by word of mouth and gaming magazines of the time, the idea that you could enter a code to get Lara naked ran rampant around the Nineties gaming scene. Although you *could* make her explode, there was never a Naked Lara code.



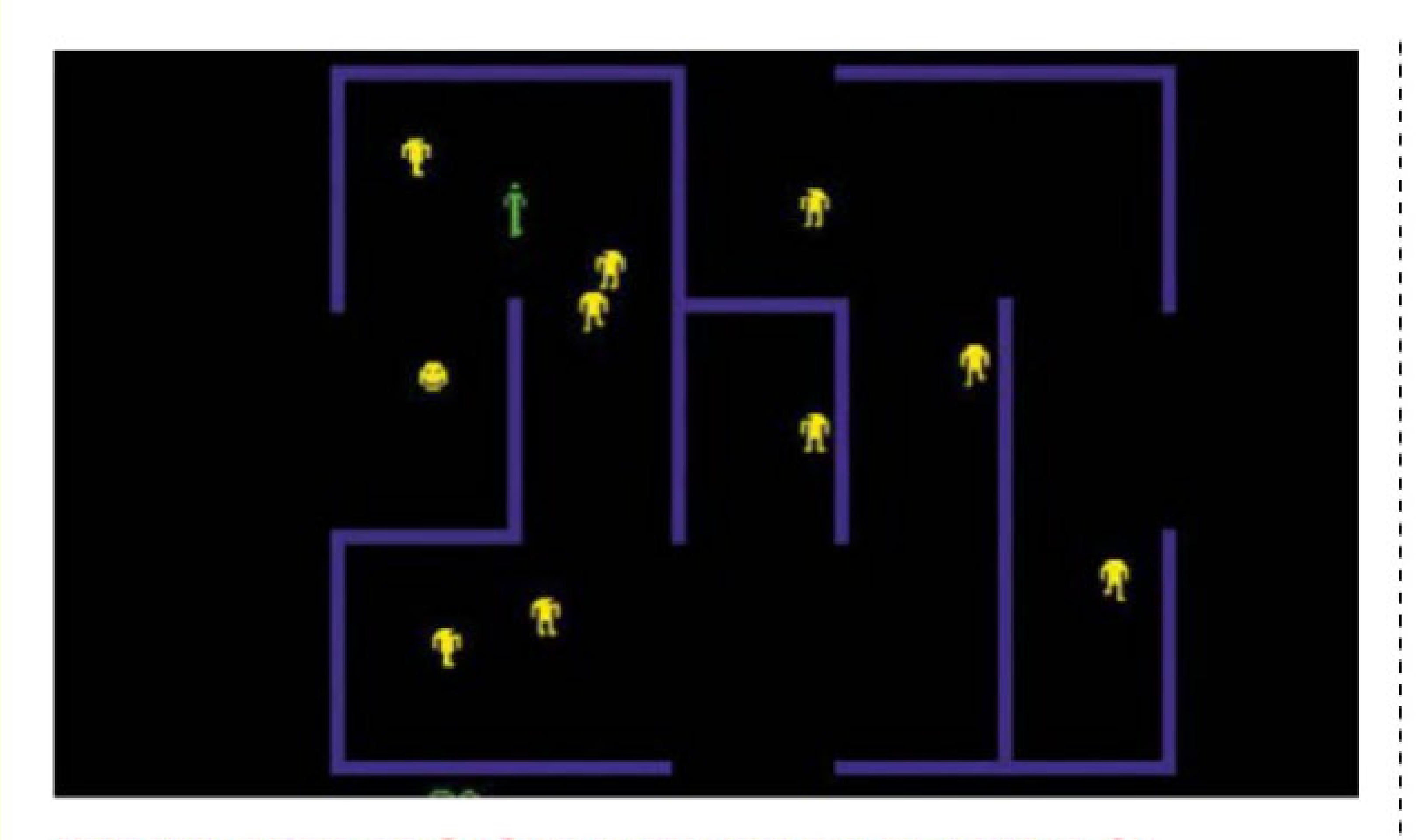
'PLAYSTATION 2S COULD POWER GUIDED MISSILES'

IN LATE 2000, news reports circulated that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling PS2 consoles to harvest their CPU chips in an effort to daisy-chain the 128-bit processors and create a computer capable of powering guided missiles. This turned out to be false.



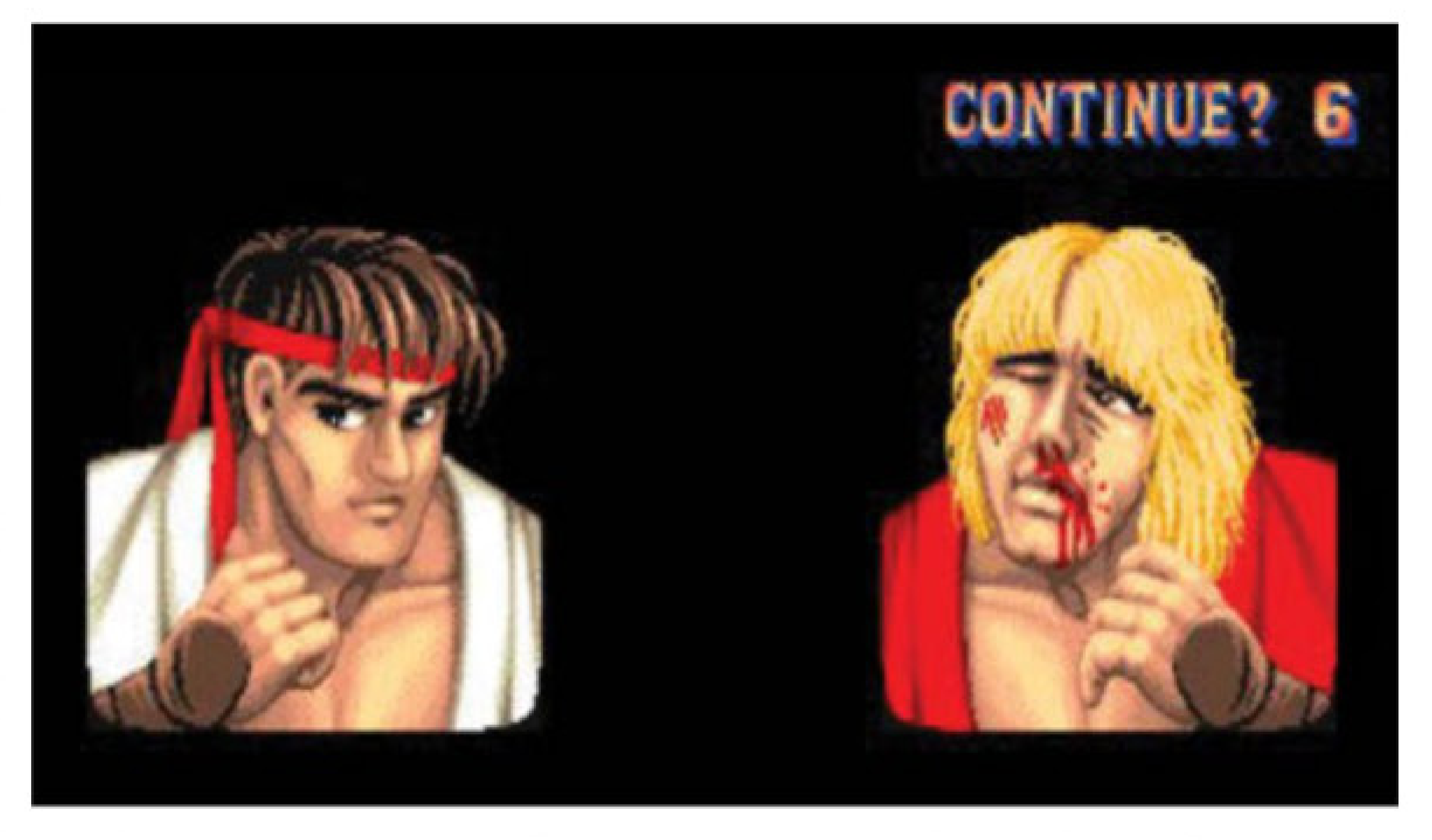
'POKÉMON RED/GREEN'S LAVENDER TOWN-INSPIRED SUICIDES'

THE ORIGINAL RELEASE of *Pokémon Red/Green* in Japan featured different Lavender Town music to the versions later released in the West – rumours claimed the original music contained high-pitched frequencies that lead to migraines and eventually suicides.



'THE VIDEOGAME THAT KILLS CHILDREN'

MANY HAVE KEPT the Eighties *Berzerk* at arms length after rumours of it causing death in its young players. Jeff Dailey and Peter Burkowski died of heart attacks after achieving 16,660 in the game. Is it all a coincidence? Definitely, but it hasn't stopped the urban myth.



'YOU CAN FIGHT SHENG LONG IN STREET FIGHTER II'

A MISTRANSLATION OF Ryu's flying uppercut from Chinese resulted in text that read, "You must defeat Sheng Long to stand a chance" in one of his victory speeches. It wasn't true, but Capcom used the hoax as a foundation for later character Gouken.



'ATTACHING A PENNY TO MORTAL KOMBAT WILL UNLOCK BLOOD'

NINTENDO WAS WORRIED that the gore *Mortal Kombat* is famous for would give its console a bad name, so it censored the SNES release. *Nintendo Magazine System* published a story that claimed if you attached a penny to the cartridge, it would weigh the pins inside down enough to unlock the gore.



'YOU CAN KEEP AERIS ALIVE IN FINAL FANTASY VII'

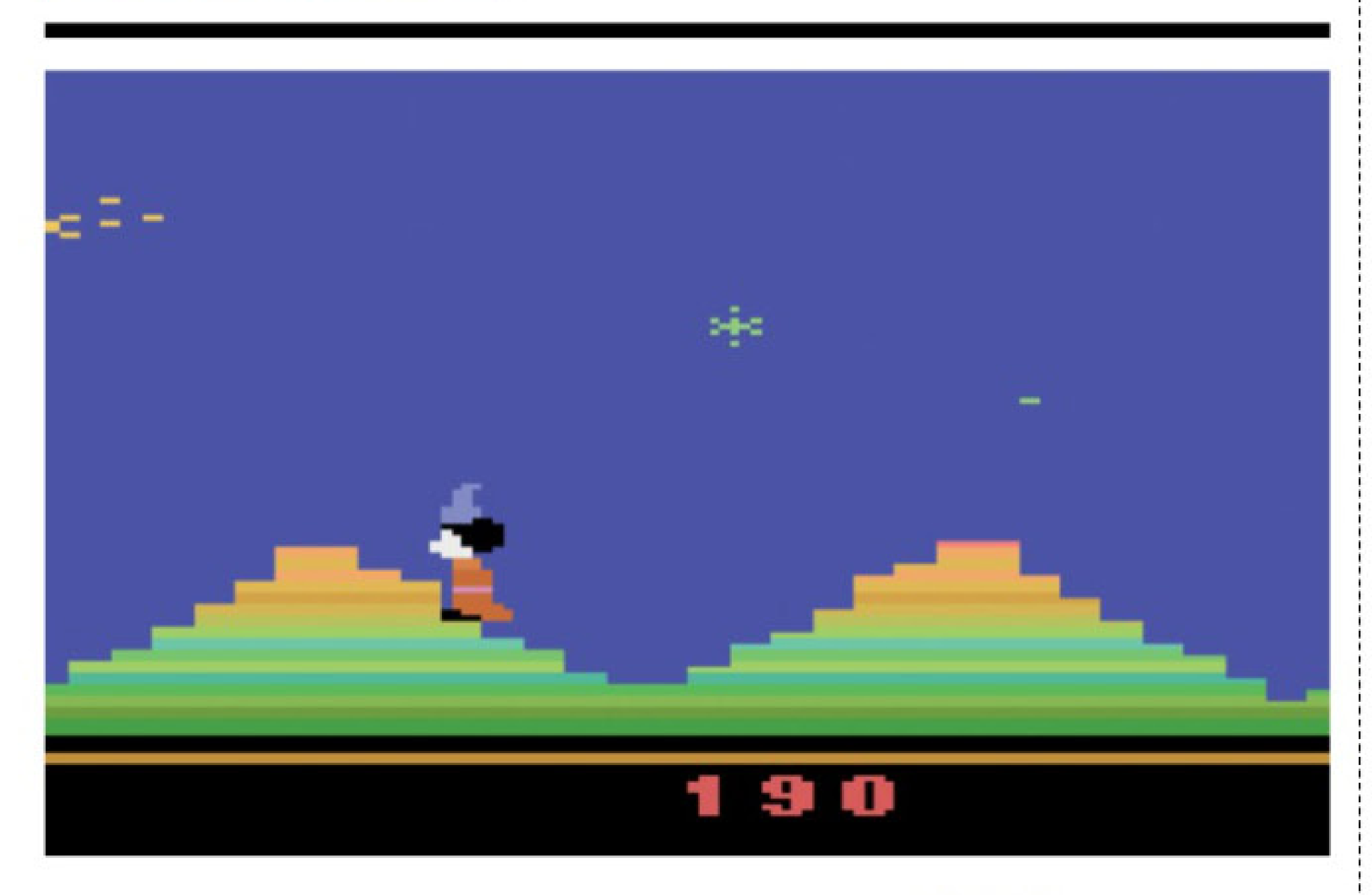
THERE ARE A MULTITUDE of theories revolving around how to keep Aeris alive in *Final Fantasy VII*, yet sadly, none of them are true, though you *can* bring back her ghost briefly in the church. Using a Gameshark, you can resurrect Aeris and she even has lines of dialogue after the end of disc 1.

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... MICKEY MOUSE

As one of the most recognisable characters, he's appeared in a few videogames as well. **games™** revisits the best and worst of Mickey's digital adventures

MICKEY MOUSE IS arguably one of the most iconic characters of all time. Created by Walt Disney, he made his cartoon debut in 1928's *Steamboat Willie*, becoming a huge star in the process. He helped build Disney into one of the entertainment industry's biggest empires and has been continually reinvented to stay current to generation after generation of children. Unsurprisingly, the mouse has appeared in plenty of videogames, but what might surprise you is the diversity of his digital outings. Join us then as we revisit his back catalogue that stretches back over 30 years.

"MICKEY MOUSE IS ARGUABLY ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC CHARACTERS OF ALL TIME"



SORCERER'S APPRENTICE 1983

PLATFORMS: ATARI 2600

Mickey's first outing on a home system is this entertaining effort. Based on the famous sketch from Fantasia, it consists of two main areas. The Mountains sees Mickey catching stars and shooting fireballs to create empty buckets. Alternatively he can move to the cavern where he must stop broomsticks from filling the area with water. It the water level rise too high on either screen the game is over.





MICKEY'S SPACE ADVENTURE 1986

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

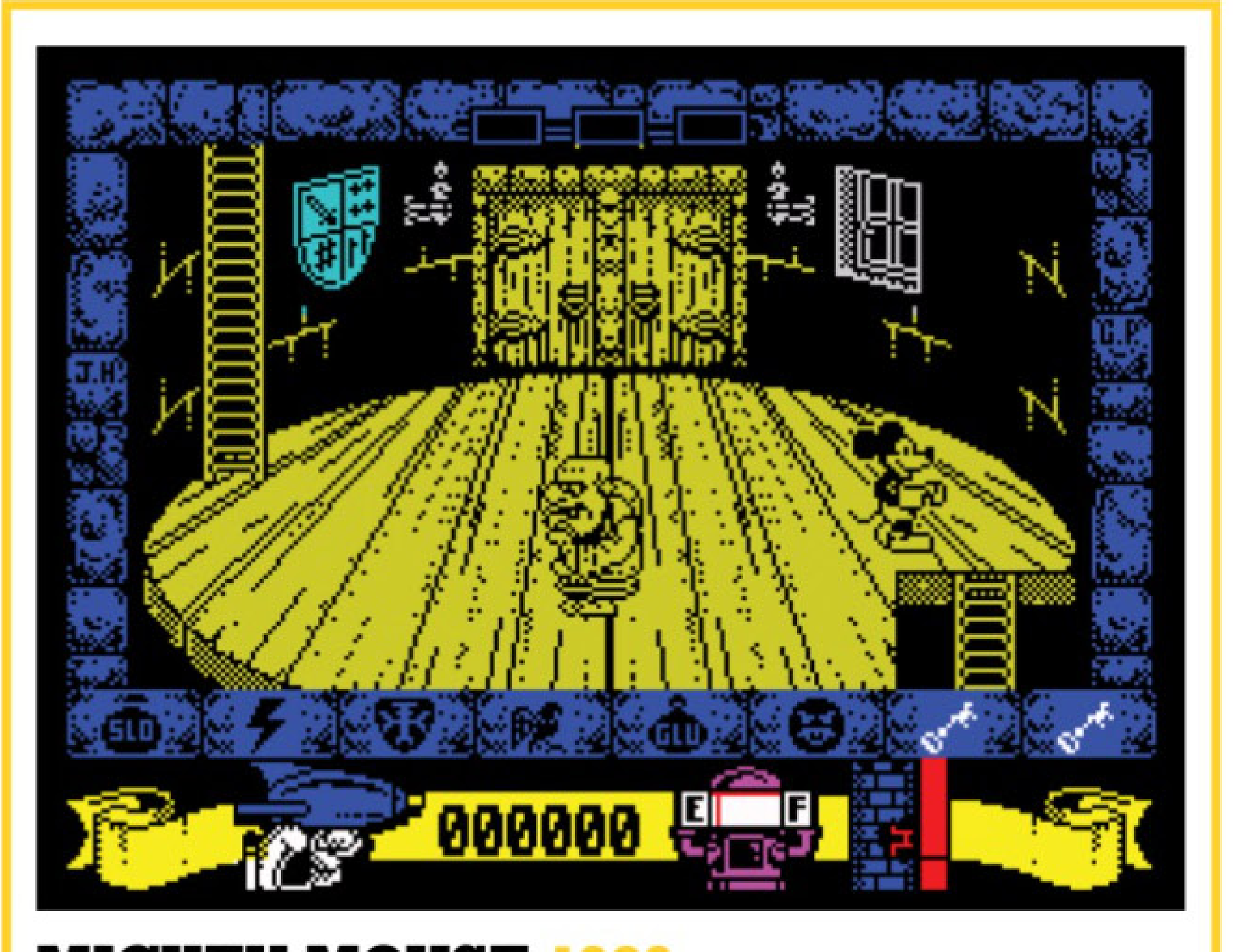
Before he became famous for his lewd Leisure Suit Larry series, Al Low created a number of adventure games for Sierra Entertainment. One of his earliest is this enjoyable graphic adventure that has Mickey head off to explore Earth's solar system in an attempt to retrieve a precious crystal. It's pretty straightforward, with words being chosen rather than typed in, but the story is pleasant enough and it's all held together by bright cartoony visuals.



MICKEY MOUSECAPADE 1987

PLATFORMS: NES

As well as having an awesome name, *Mickey Mousecapade* is notable for being the first of many Mickey Mouse games published by Capcom. The game itself is by Hudson Soft, who cheekily nicked sprites from its other games and threw them against the hapless mouse and his best gal Minnie. Minnie is an interesting addition, following Mickey around and doubling his fire power when relevant power-ups appear, but also getting occasionally caught on random objects. The game itself is a fairly basic platformer that's made more interesting by the number of differences between the Japanese and American versions (a trait of many other Mickey Mouse games). While the Japanese version focuses on *Alice In Wonderland*, the Western version features a variety of Disney films, including *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* and *The Jungle Book*.

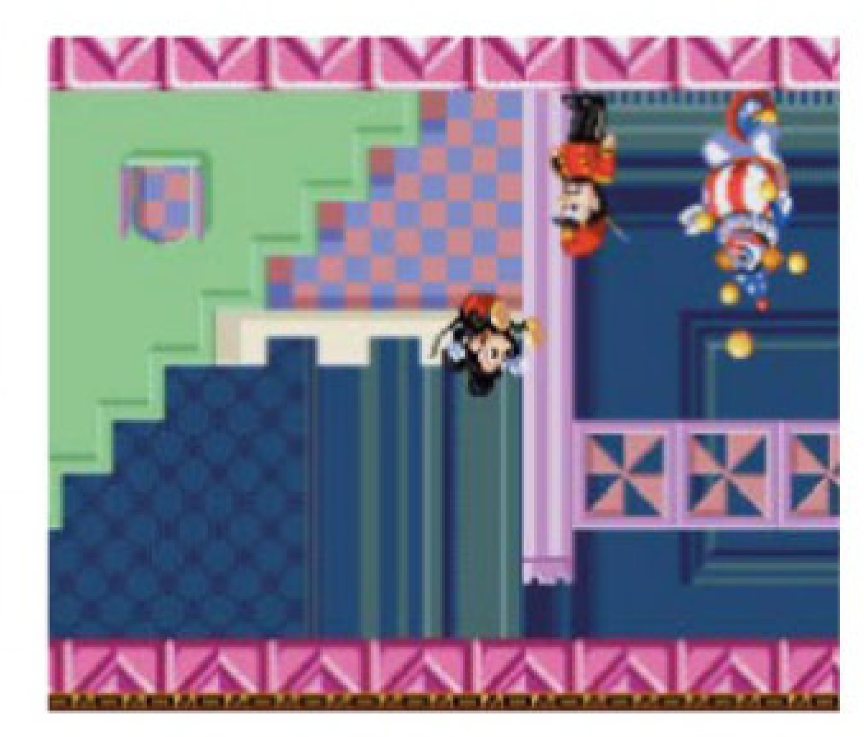


MICKEY MOUSE 1988

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

Although Capcom had the Mickey Mouse licences sewn up for consoles, the home-computer market was fair game to anyone that wanted to have a crack at the iconic mouse. The earliest official game is this effort from Gremlin Graphics that's memorable for its cover that depicts Mickey waggling a Kempston Joystick. The game itself is okay, and has Mickey climbing towers in an attempt to recover Merlin's wand. Armed only with a water pistol and a rubber mallet, Mickey must squirt and wallop his way to victory, alternating between weapons, depending on what enemies he's facing.

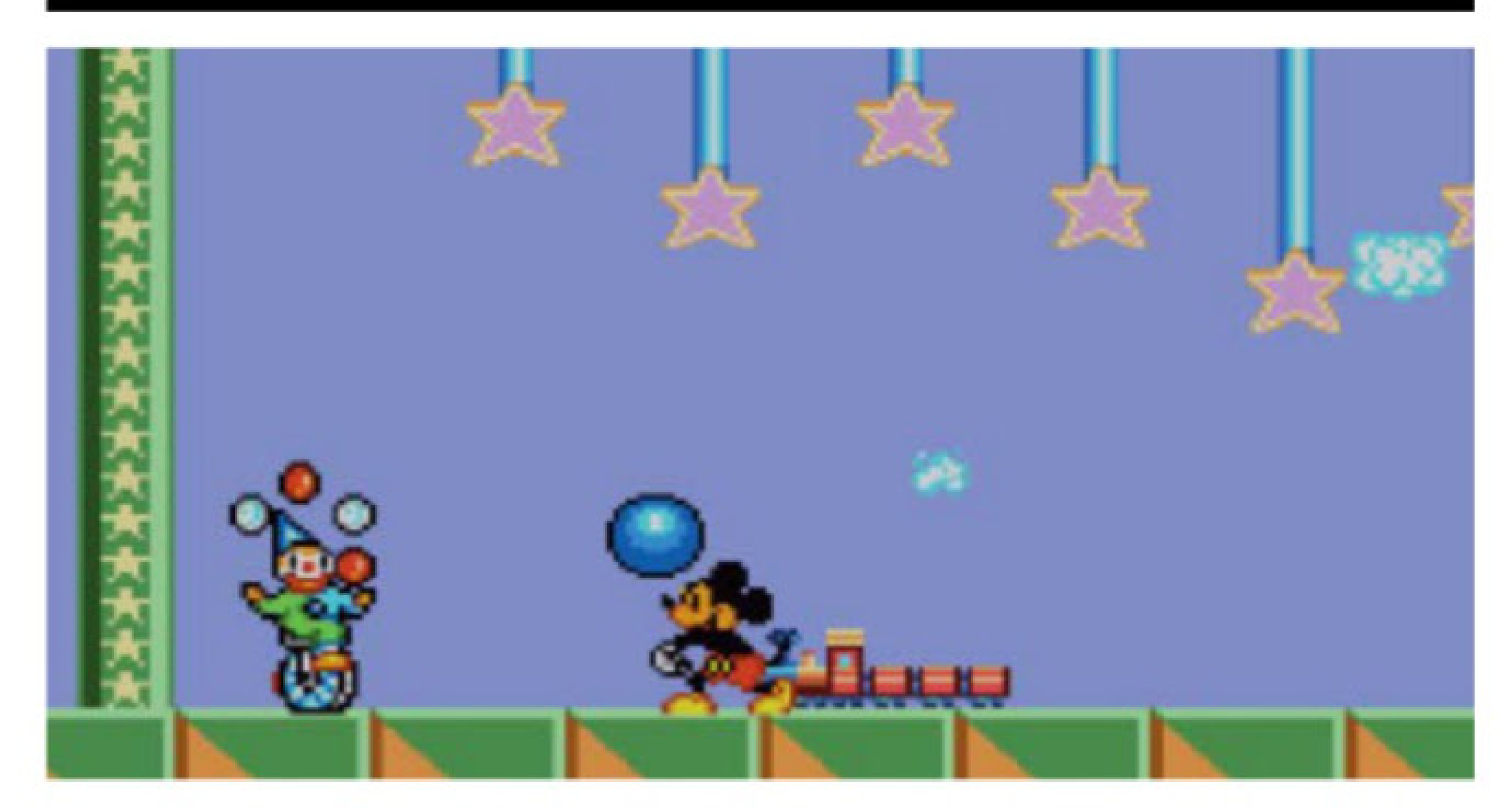




CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 1990

PLATFORMS: MEGA DRIVE

■ For many gamers, this remains the best Mickey Mouse game. It has everything you'd want for a triple-A release – amazing aesthetics, tightly crafted gameplay and superb level design. The castle is full of variety, while a large selection of bosses keeps you on your toes and urges you through every world. If there's one complaint we have, it's that the game is perhaps a little too easy for its own good, allowing even average players to see all its secrets in a relatively short space of time.



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 1990

PLATFORMS: MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR

■ We'll say this very quietly in case we wake the internet, but this is actually better than Sega's Mega Drive game. While it's aesthetically inferior, Sega worked its magic and delivered a platformer that made the most of the Master System's capabilities. The gameplay is more challenging, with tougher bosses and generally harder levels.

MICKEY'S 123: THE BIG SURPRISE PARTY 1990

PLATFORMS: AMIGA, DOS

■ Mickey isn't just an entertainer to children; he's an educator as well. *Mickey's 123* is the first of many games aimed at younger children to teach them rudimentary skills, in this case numbers. Pressing different numbered keys lets Mickey buy burgers, make toys and visit numerous locations as he prepares Minnie's birthday party.



AND THE REST…

All the other official games and expansions released

■ **MICKEY MOUSE**
YEAR: 1981, **SYSTEM:** GAME & WATCH

■ **MICKEY & DONALD**
YEAR: 1982, **SYSTEM:** GAME & WATCH

■ **MICKEY MOUSE 2**
YEAR: 1984, **SYSTEM:** GAME & WATCH

■ **MICKEY'S CROSSWORD PUZZLE MAKER**
YEAR: 1991, **SYSTEM:** APPLE II, DOS

■ **MICKEY'S RUNAWAY ZOO**
YEAR: 1991 **SYSTEM:** AMIGA, DOS

■ **FOLLOW THE READER**
YEAR: 1993, **SYSTEM:** DOS

■ **MICKEY MOUSE: MAGIC WANDS!**
YEAR: 1993, **SYSTEM:** GAME BOY

■ **MICKEY'S SAFARI IN LETTERLAND**
YEAR: 1993, **SYSTEM:** NES

■ **MICKEY'S ADVENTURES IN NUMBERLAND**
YEAR: 1994, **SYSTEM:** NES

■ **DISNEY'S MAGICAL QUEST 2**
YEAR: 1994, **SYSTEM:** VARIOUS

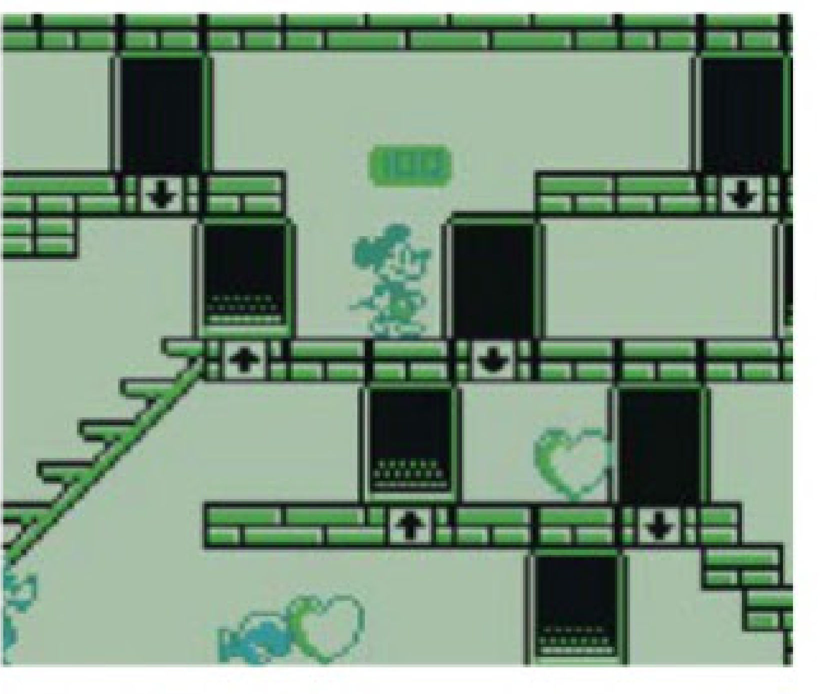
■ **LEGEND OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE**
YEAR: 1995, **SYSTEM:** GAME GEAR, MASTER SYSTEM

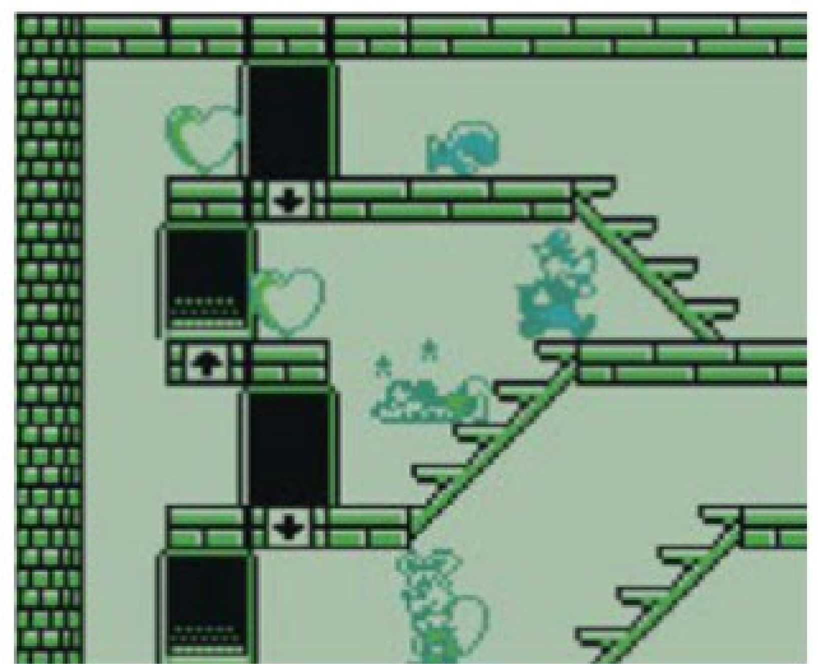
■ **MICKEY'S RACING ADVENTURE**
YEAR: 1999, **SYSTEM:** GAME BOY COLOR

■ **MAGICAL TETRIS CHALLENGE**
YEAR: 1999, **SYSTEM:** VARIOUS

■ **DISNEY'S MICKEY MOUSE TODDLER**
YEAR: 2000, **SYSTEM:** WINDOWS

■ **DISNEY'S MICKEY SAVES THE DAY: 3D ADVENTURE**
YEAR: 2001, **SYSTEM:** WINDOWS





MICKEY MOUSE 1991

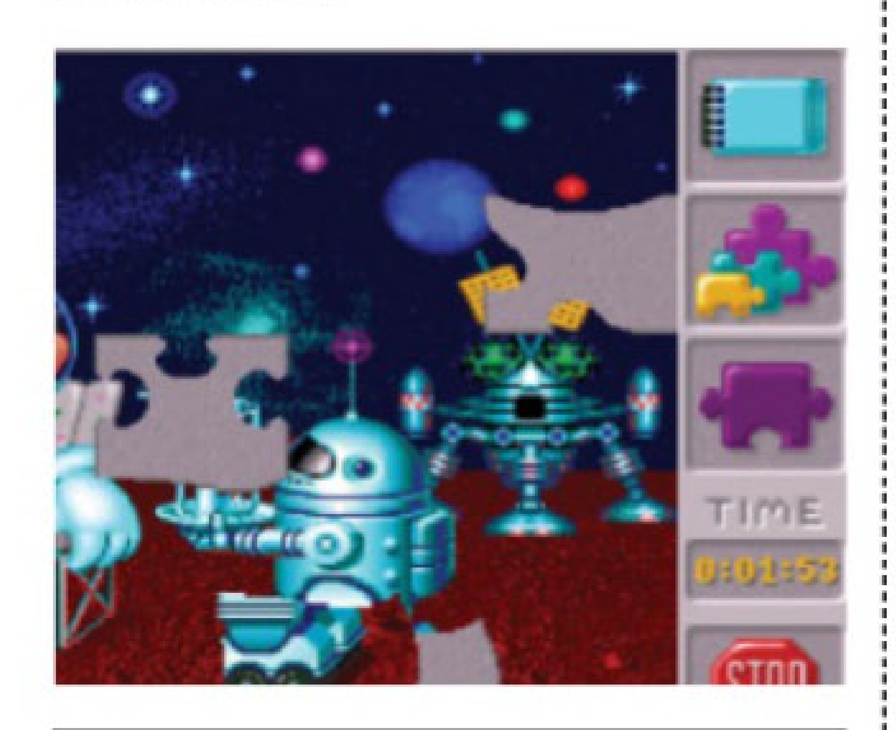
PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

■ If this game looks familiar, it's probably because you've come to know it as *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*. Kemco unfortunately didn't have the Mickey Mouse license outside of Japan. To counteract this, Kemco chose instead to stick various other licensed characters in its overseas iterations of the game. Mickey Mouse is a quirky puzzle platformer with Mickey rushing and running around the stages, squashing bad guys and collecting hearts. There really isn't a lot to this game, with its simple dynamics and basic graphics, but it is perfectly well suited for the Game Boy thanks to its handy password system.

MICKEY'S JIGSAW PUZZLES 1991

PLATFORMS: AMIGA, DOS

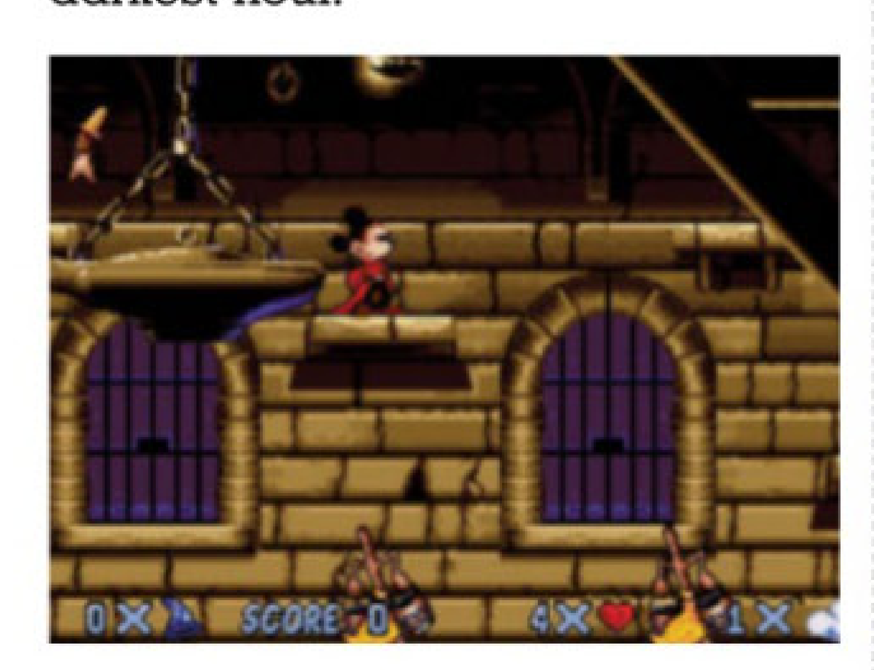
Everyone likes jigsaws, right? So a jigsaw game starring Mickey Mouse is a no-brainer. It's actually nowhere near as boring as it sounds, thanks to the large number of puzzles to choose from and the option of breaking them into a maximum of 64 pieces, which delivers a stiff challenge. This is a diverting little time-waster that's worth whiling away an hour or four.

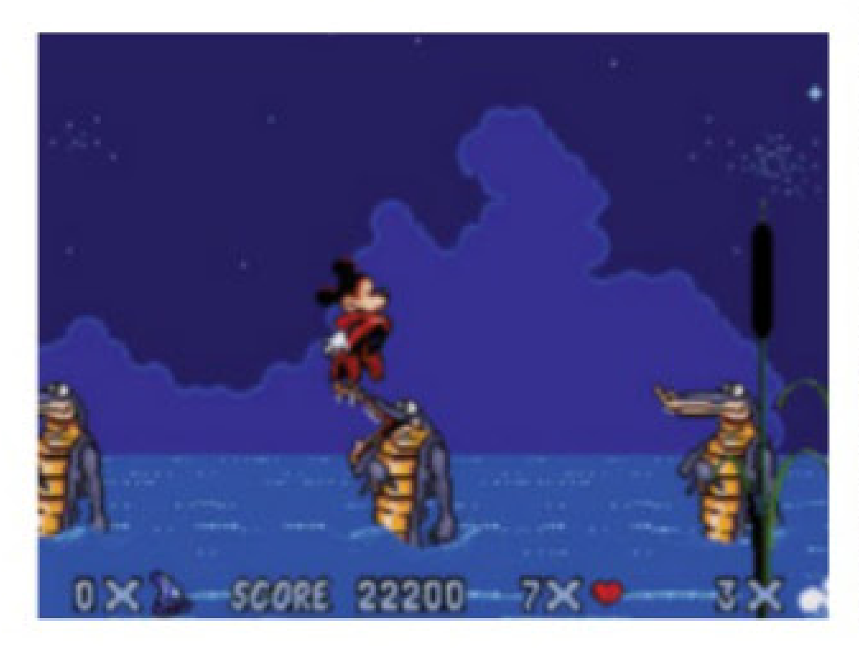


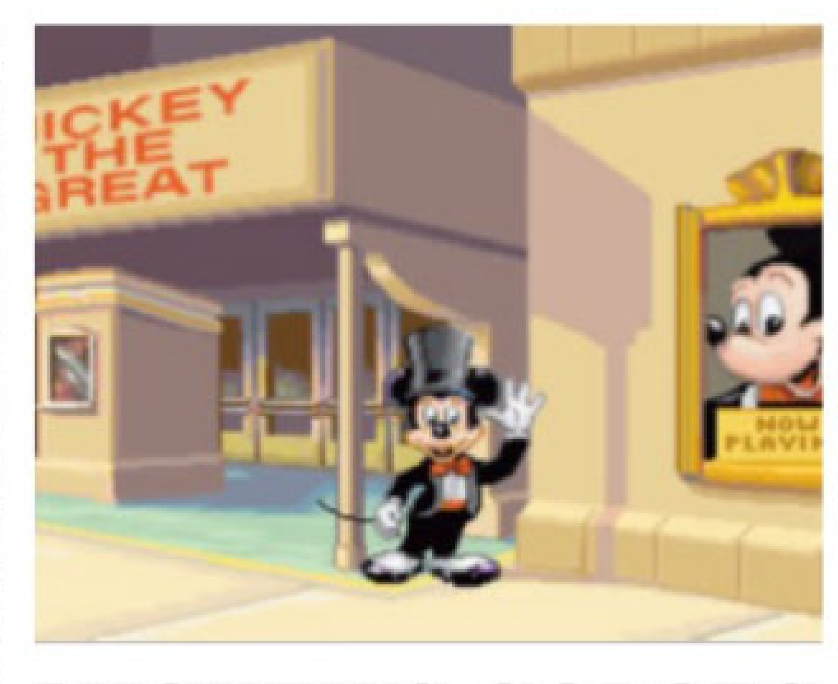
FANTASIA 1991

PLATFORMS: MEGA DRIVE

Playing *Fantasia* is about as pleasant an experience as rolling around naked in a field of hedgehogs. Everything that made *Castle Of Illusion* such a joy is missing from Sega's farmed-out sequel. While it is still visually outstanding, the collision detection has all the grace and finesse of a hippo on skates, while the delightful orchestrated soundtrack of the original film has been butchered so badly that you'll more-than happily perforate your eardrums with carrots in order to never have to hear it again. This is, without a doubt, Mickey's darkest hour.





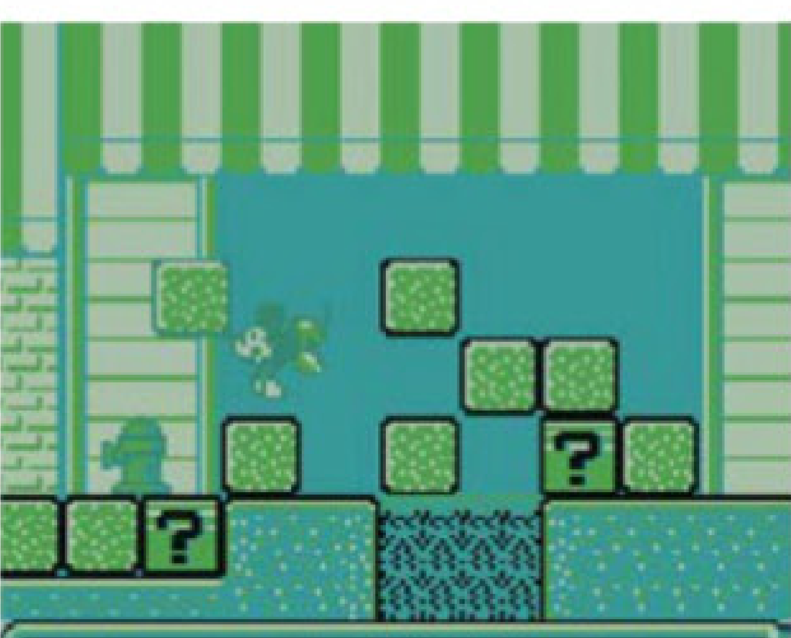


MICKEY'S COLORS & SHAPES 1991

PLATFORMS: DOS

This education game teaches colours and shapes to youngsters. It's very basic, even for an education title, with the player helping Mickey perform tricks by pointing out the correct shapes and colours. It's again marred by hefty loading times and is as shallow as a puddle.

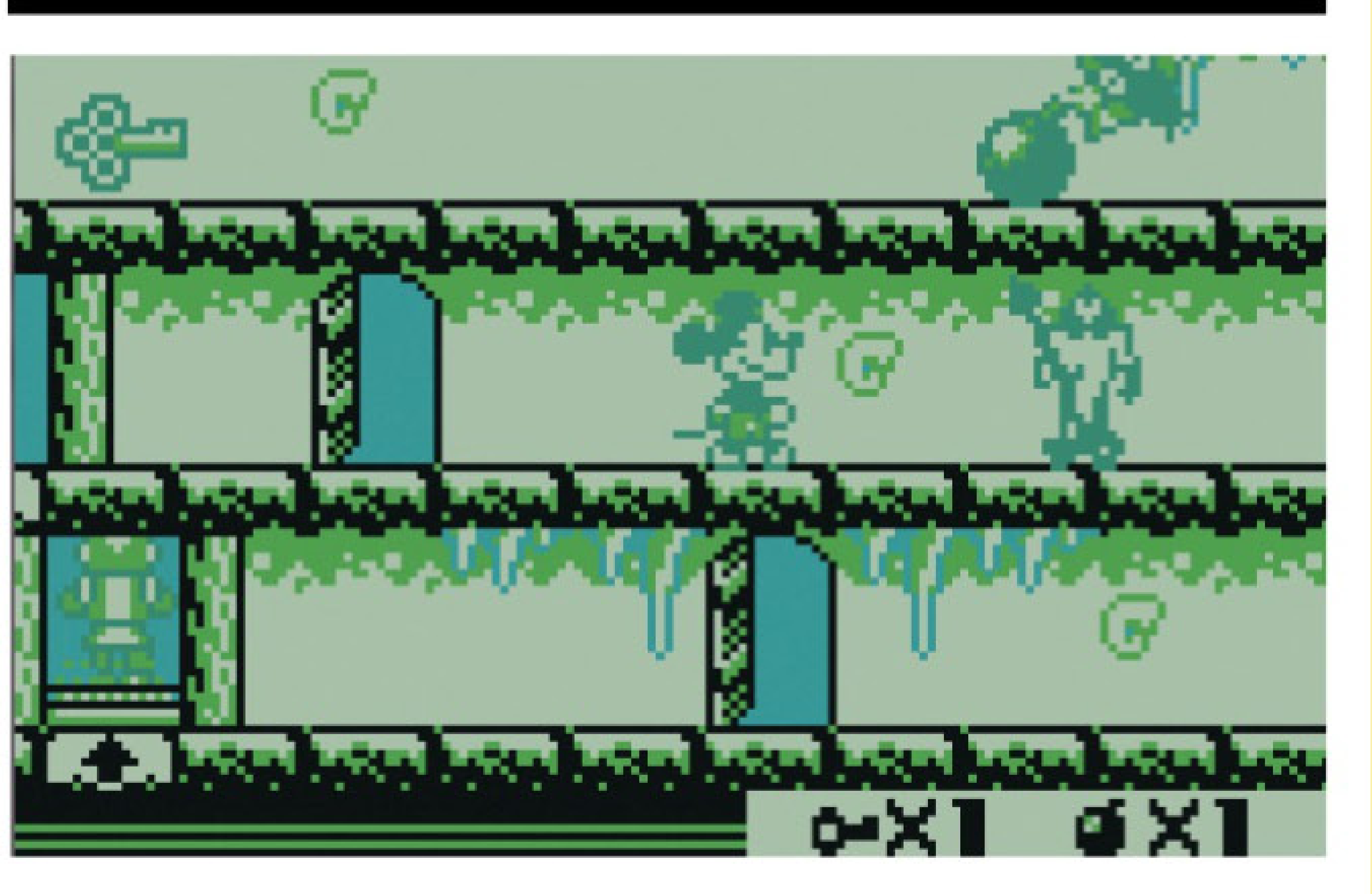




MICKEY'S CHASE 1991

PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

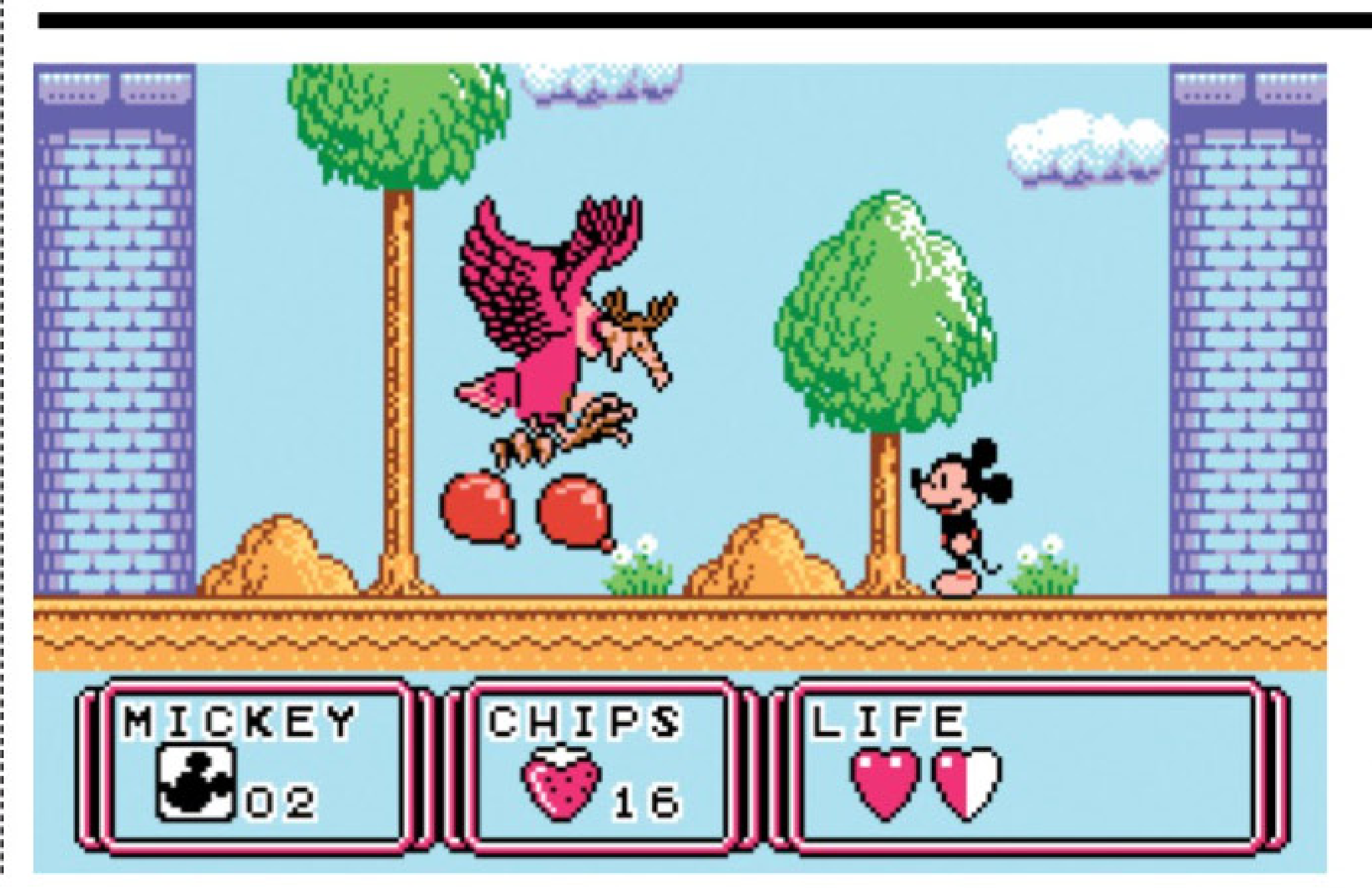
Production's Game Boy platformer is a more traditional affair, ripping off *Super Mario Bros.* Mickey or Minnie can leap around, picking up and chucking blocks at enemies. It's a fun game in short doses, but lacks the refinement and polished controls of the game it's trying so hard to imitate.



MICKEY MOUSE II 1991

PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

Kemco's handheld sequel is a hugely dramatic improvement over the original, featuring levels that are much better designed, chunkier sprites and more game mechanics that range from using hammers to smash boulders to escaping up handy pipes. It's known in the West as *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle 2* or *Hugo*, depending on where you live.



THE KINGDOM HEARTS CONNECTION

The Square/Disney crossover that somehow manages to please everyone

Although Mickey doesn't actually star in them, it would be churlish to not include a brief look at the *Kingdom Hearts* series. First released in 2002, it immediately drew the attention of gamers thanks to the top-tier tagging of both Disney and *Final Fantasy*.

A slavish fan product that was also married to a great game, the original adventure saw hero Sora teaming up with Donald Duck and Goofy in an attempt to free Mickey. He's briefly playable in *Kingdom Hearts 2*, but for the most part he's just there for support or to continue driving the story forward.

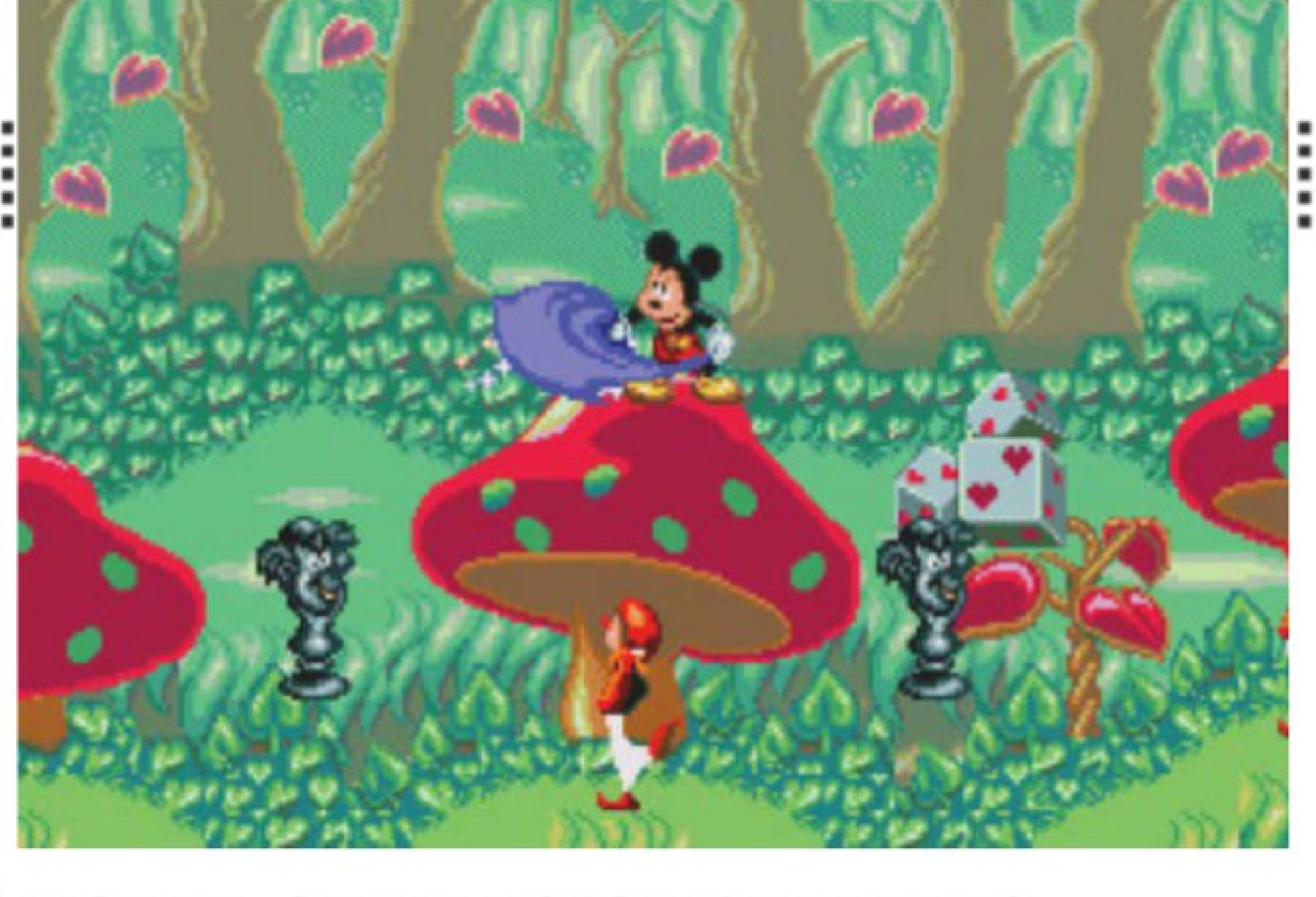
The series has been a huge success for Square Enix, shifting over 20-million copies across seven games. Fans continue to hope that Mickey will be fully playable in the upcoming *Kingdom Hearts 3*, but we feel that's unlikely. It doesn't stop us wishing, mind.



MICKEY MOUSE III: YUME FUUSEN 1992

PLATFORMS: NES

Kemco's third game was exclusive to NES and moved away from the formulae of previous titles. Mickey can fling balloons at enemies, jump on them to gain more height or even use them to float around the stage. Interesting mechanics aside, it's a rock-hard platformer that's the wrong side of frustrating. Those from the West will know it as *Kid Klown In Night Mayor World*. What do you mean? You've never heard of it?



MICKEY'S ABC'S: A DAY AT THE FAIR 1992

PLATFORMS: AMIGA, DOS

■ Like *Mickey's 123*, *ABC* is by Distinctive Software and aimed at two to five-year-olds. It boasts the same animated sprites and colourful locations, but centres around teaching children the alphabet. Kids can press a button to trigger a sequence or get Mickey to do things by selecting a letter.





LAND OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 1992

PLATFORMS: MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR

■ Sega's *Illusion* sequel is certainly worth tracking down, as it builds nicely on the mechanics found in Castle Of Illusion. In addition to picking up items, Mickey also earns several powers as the game progresses. There are more environmental hazards, while the new map screen allows for a sense of progression. Be warned though, like its *Castle Of Illusion* counterpart it's an equally tough cookie to crack.

WORLD OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE & DONALD DUCK 1992

PLATFORMS: MEGA DRIVE

■ Who would have thought that the addition of Donald Duck would create one of Mickey's best games? Mickey's hard-to-understand friend helps turn *World Of Illusion* into a fantastic multiplayer affair, with many of the stages built around the two buddies helping each other out. It works exceptionally well, delivering one of the best co-op games on the console. It's just as playable on your own as either Mickey or Donald, but really shines with a friend. Its only downside is that like *Castle Of Illusion*, it's a little too easy.

DISNEY'S MAGICAL QUEST 1992

PLATFORMS: SNES, GBA

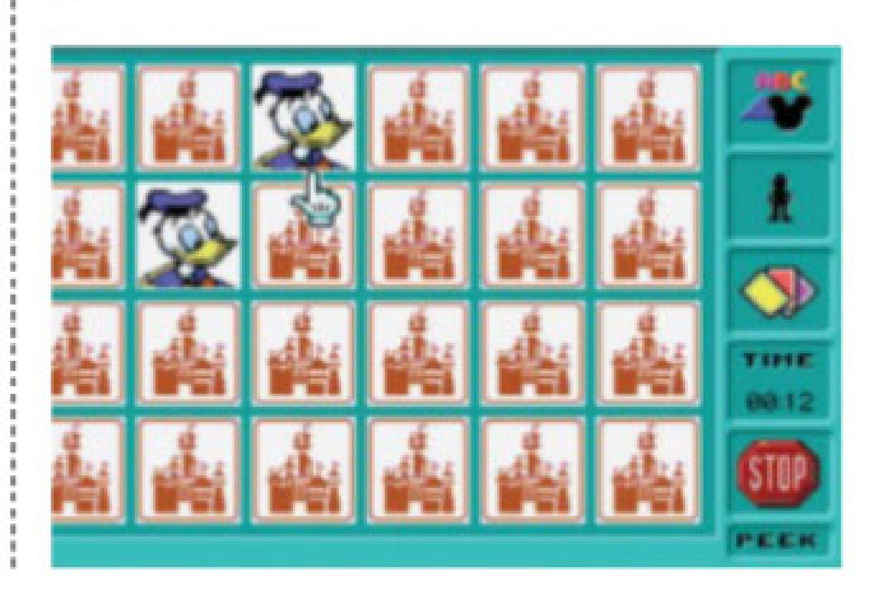
■ Like *Castle Of Illusion*, it's a little simple, but has far more challenging bosses and detailed visuals. A GBA update was released, adding a range of mini-games and introduced Minnie Mouse as a playable character.



MICKEY'S MEMORY CHALLENGE 1993

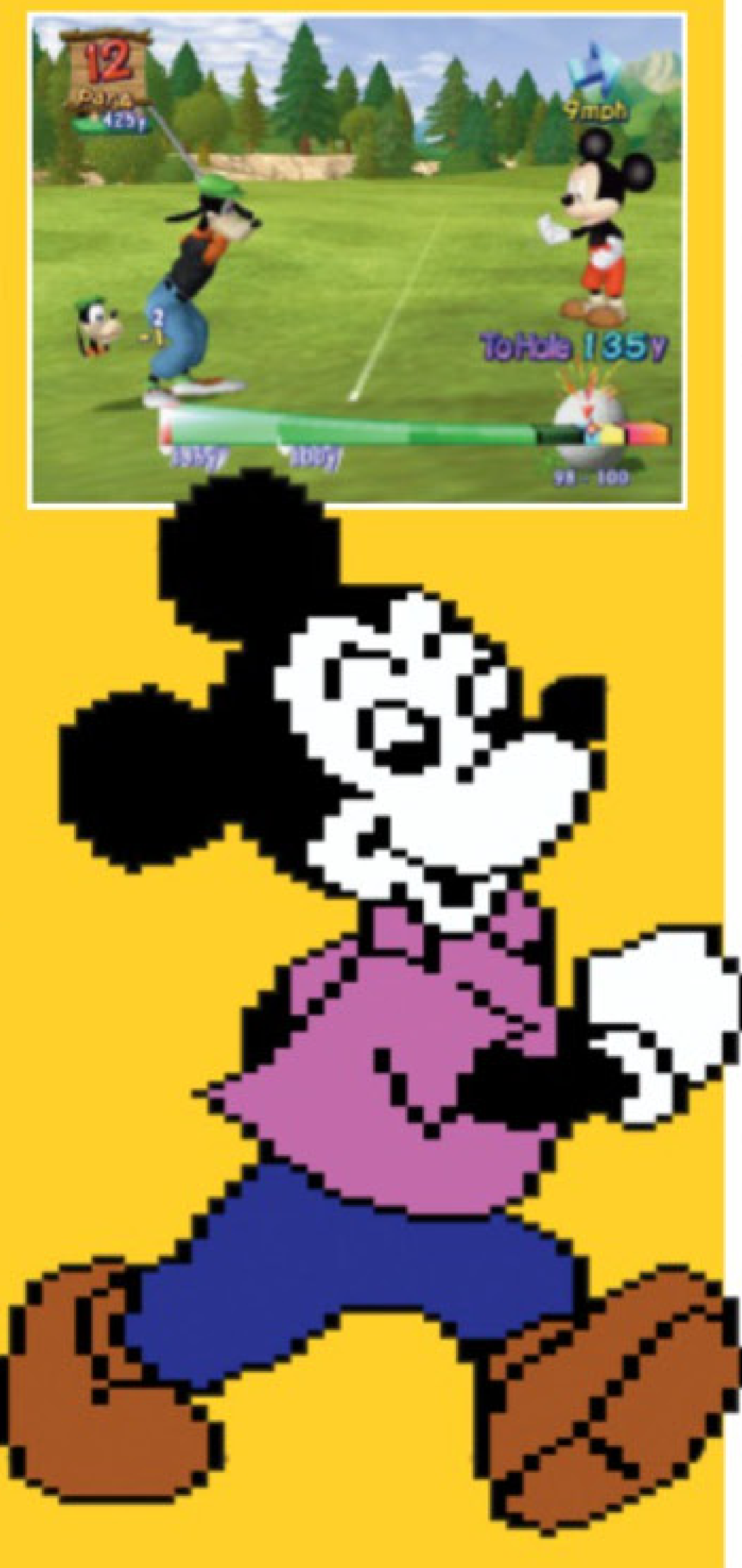
PLATFORMS: DOS

■ Another extremely basic children's game courtesy of Infogrames. Most children will happily match the pictures of famous Disney characters, but you can mix things up by combining pictures with the relevant words.



MICKEY MOUSE: TEAM PLAYER

Although it's only natural that a mouse as talented as Mickey gets his own games, he's not afraid to share the limelight with others. Sadly, while Mickey loves being a team player, he struggles to pick decent games to appear in. Take the range of sports games by Konami for example. They're all woefully bad. *Disney Sports Soccer*, *Motocross*, *Skateboarding*, *Football*, *Basketball*, *Snowboarding* are terrible games that deserve nothing more than a collective mention. In fact, the only sports game he's appeared in that's any cop is *Disney Golf* on PS2, but even that's not a patch on similar games. Mickey also headed the cast of Chinese online-racer *Disney Magicboard Online*. Sadly, it appears to have been shut down.



MICKEY MOUSE IV: THE MAGICAL LABYRINTH 1993

PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

■ Known as *The Real Ghostbusters* stateside and *Garfield Labyrinth* in Europe, this is easily one of the most puzzle-orientated *Crazy Castle* games. While Mickey's pneumatic drill adds a welcome new game mechanic, the overall level design is rather weak.



MICKEY'S ULTIMATE CHALLENGE 1994

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

■ *Ultimate Challenge* will be of interest as it's an early effort by Wayforward Technologies and is the last game released for the Sega Master System. *Ultimate Challenge* is an otherwise dull adventure that has Mickey and Minnie performing puzzles in an attempt to save the citizens of Beanswick.



MICKEY MANIA 1994

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

There are lots of facts about *Mickey Mania*. David Jaffe made his debut here as a stage designer, it's the first Mickey Mouse game to feature actual Disney animators, and each level is based around a classic cartoon. It's bone-crushingly difficult in places, with 'god, I want to die' difficulty spikes.



MICKEY NO TOKYO DISNEYLAND DAIBOKEN 1994

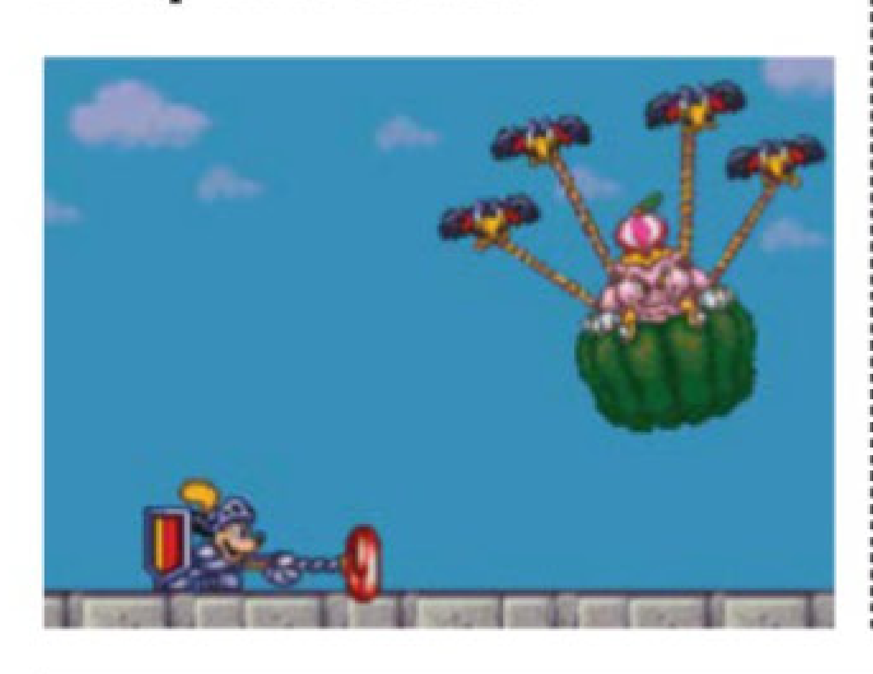
PLATFORMS: SNES

No wonder this never made it outside of Japan. It's terrible. The graphics are smart, but the controls are horribly clunky and imprecise, making it a nightmare to navigate the enemy-filled locations. Sorry Minnie, you'll have to stay kidnapped.

DISNEY'S MAGICAL QUEST 3 1995

PLATFORMS: SNES, GBA

The last *Magical Quest* game sees Mickey team up with Donald Duck. It introduces new suits, another motley selection of bosses and some great visuals. It's slightly tougher than the previous two games, but never frustratingly so. The GBA version featured a link-up mode as well.



MICKEY'S SPEEDWAY USA 2000

PLATFORMS: N64, GAME BOY COLOR

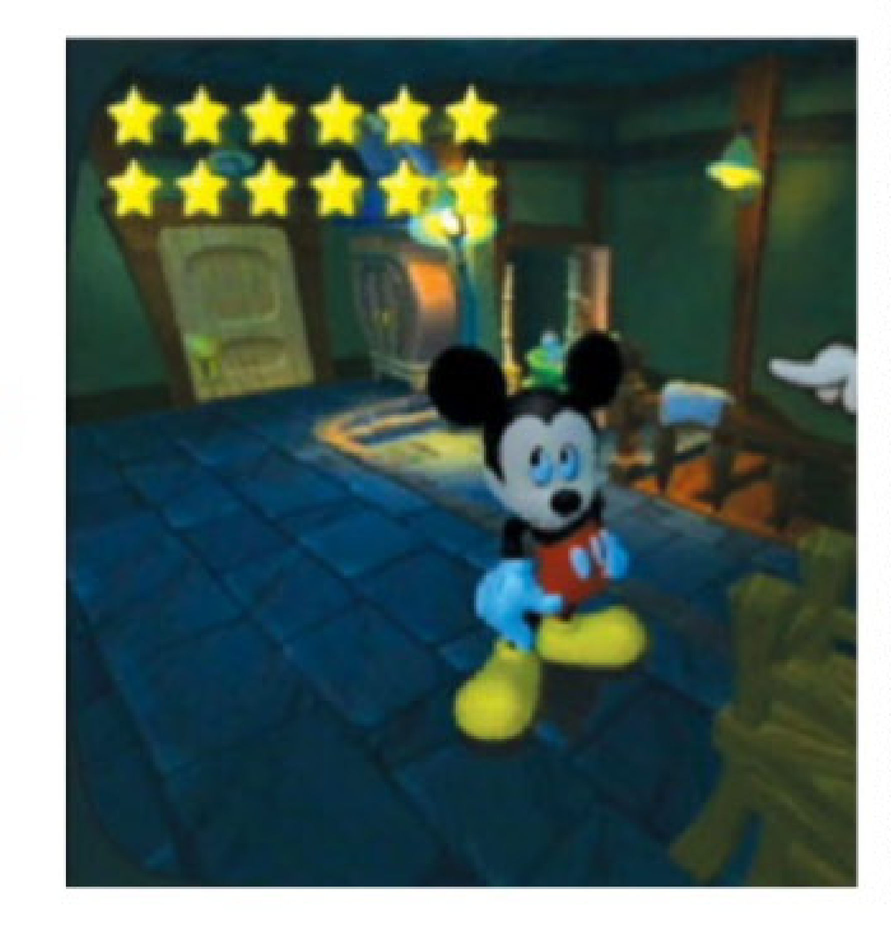
It was only a matter of time before Mickey jumped into a kart and tried to outdo Mario. It's a fine effort, with slick handling, but then you'd expect no less from Rare. The track design isn't quite as good as other N64 kart racers, but it remains a hoot in multiplayer.



DISNEY'S MAGICAL MIRROR STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 2002

PLATFORMS: GAMECUBE

Based on the 1936 cartoon *Thru The Mirror*, *Magical Mirror*, aimed at younger kids, is a tediously mundane point-and-click adventure that's about as much fun as hitting yourself in the face with a frozen packet of grill steaks.





DISNEY'S HIDE AND SNEAK 2003

PLATFORMS: GAMECUBE

There's a reason why it took Disney seven years to create a new Mickey Mouse game. That reason is Disney's *Hide And Sneak*. As the name suggests there's a big emphasis on sneaking, but Capcom has also thrown a number of puzzles into the mix, making it an odd bastardisation of *Magical Mirror*, and we know how that turned out… An odd mish-mash of genres that even youngsters will be bored of.



EPIC MICKEY 2010

PLATFORMS: WII

There were high hopes for *Epic Mickey*. Legendary games designer Warren Spector and his studio Junction Point Studios was at the helm, its concept art looked suitably weird and it boasted some interesting paint mechanics. Then *Epic Mickey* came out and everything fell apart. Spector appeared to be stuck in the late-Nineties, delivering a bland platformer.



EPIC MICKEY 2: THE POWER OF TWO 2012

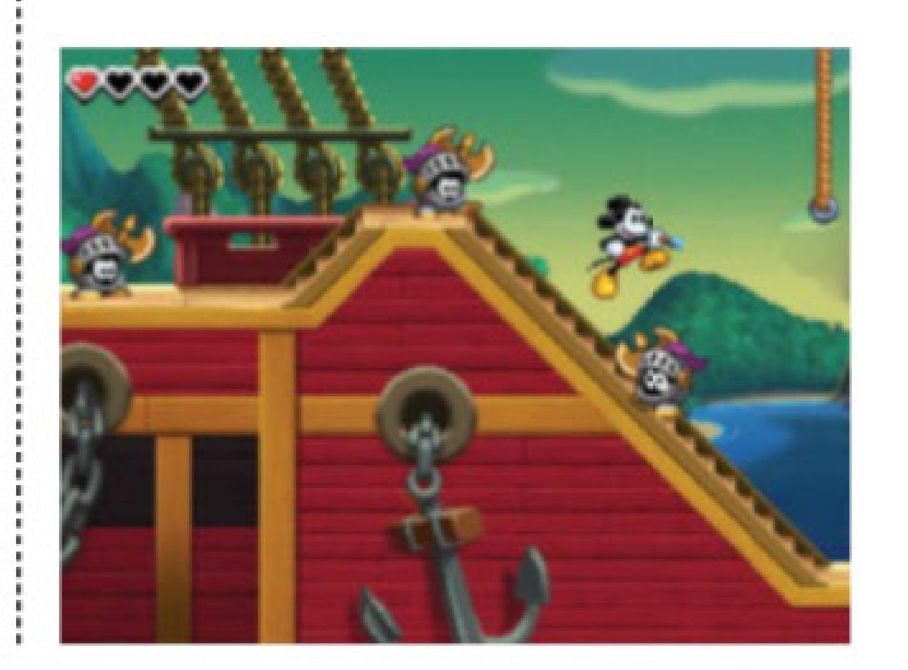
PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

Spector's second attempt failed to improve on his first. The addition of Oswald as a secondary character is a nice touch, but it fails to fix the problems that plagued the original. Despite appearing on a myriad of systems, it sold a fraction that the original did.

EPIC MICKEY: POWER OF ILLUSION 2012

PLATFORMS: 3DS

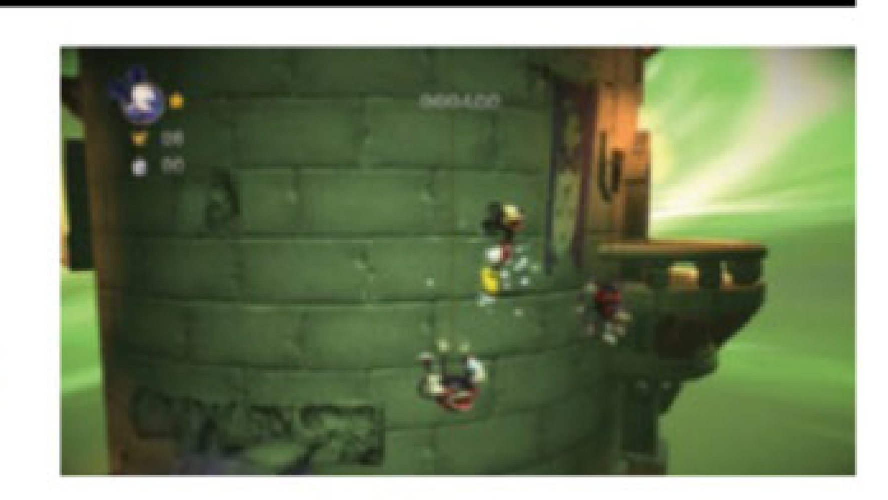
Released alongside *Epic Mickey 2, Power Of Illusion* appeared to channel the classic Mega Drive game. Appearances are deceiving, however, and it's actually a bland romp through classic Disney films, with Mickey using the paintbrush skills he picked up in *Epic Mickey*.



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 2013

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

This is how you do a remake. It pays careful tribute to the source material, but sensibly updates it for a new generation of gamers. It's arguably the best Mickey Mouse game of the last generation, but it still pulled in relatively low scores.





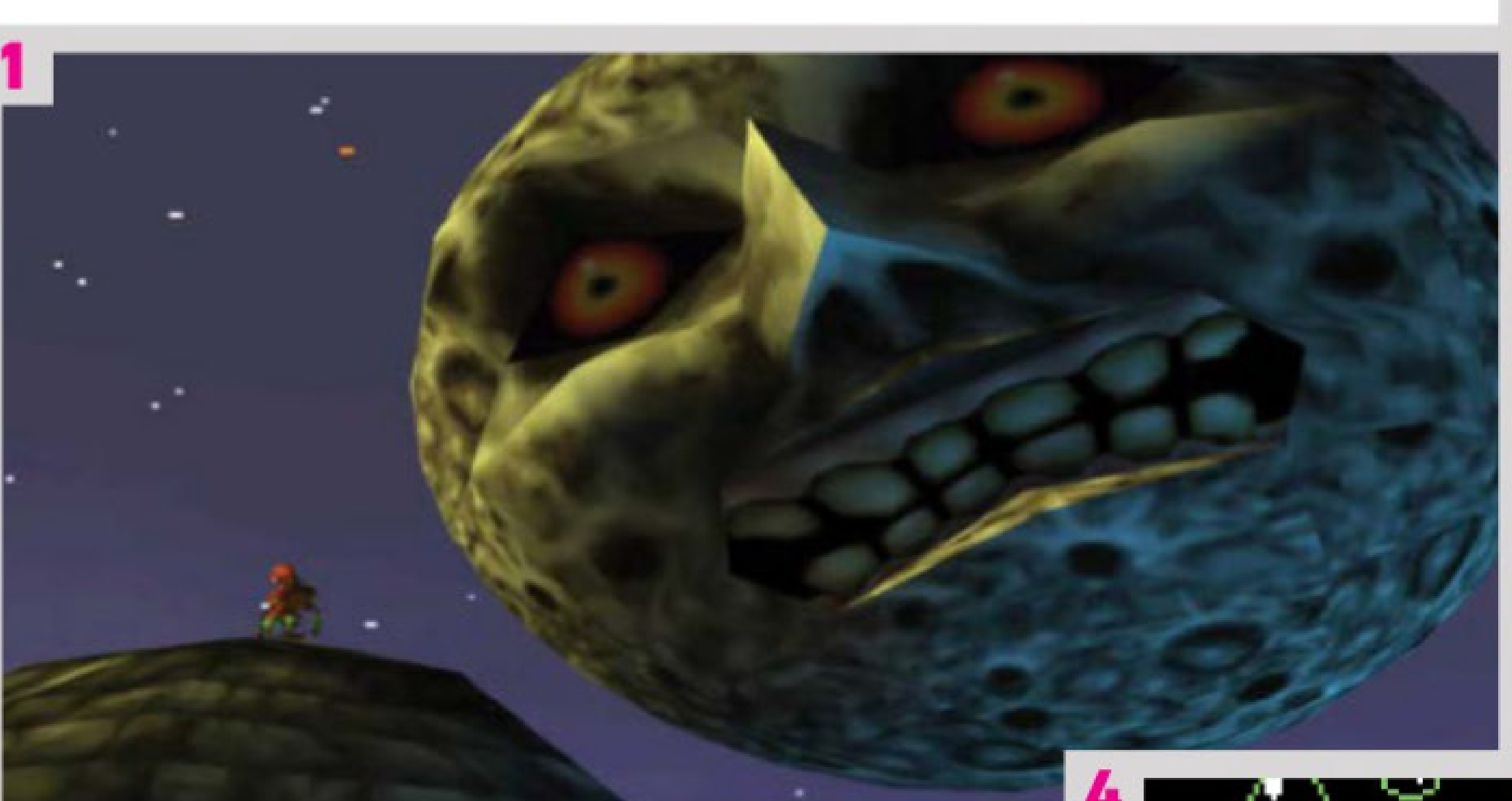
ESSENTIALS

10 TOP 10 DOOM CLOCKS

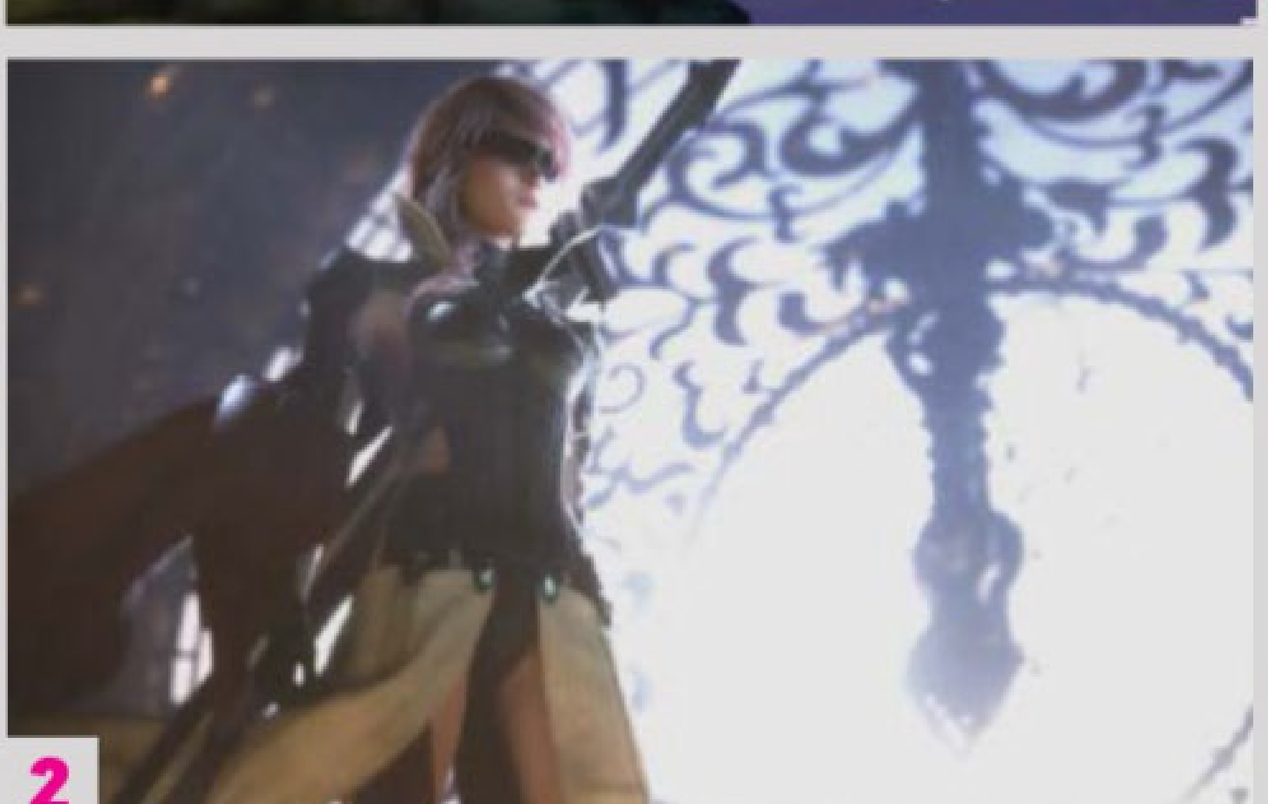
■ The 'doom clock', or doom timer, is a fascinating mechanic in gaming – its primary uses usually involve some kind of unstoppable death at the end of a countdown. Loved by some, loathed by many, the doom clock pressures players. Mixing a completionist with a doom clock is a recipe for frustration. With that in mind, you'd better read our ten best before this magazine self-destructs in five, four, three, two...



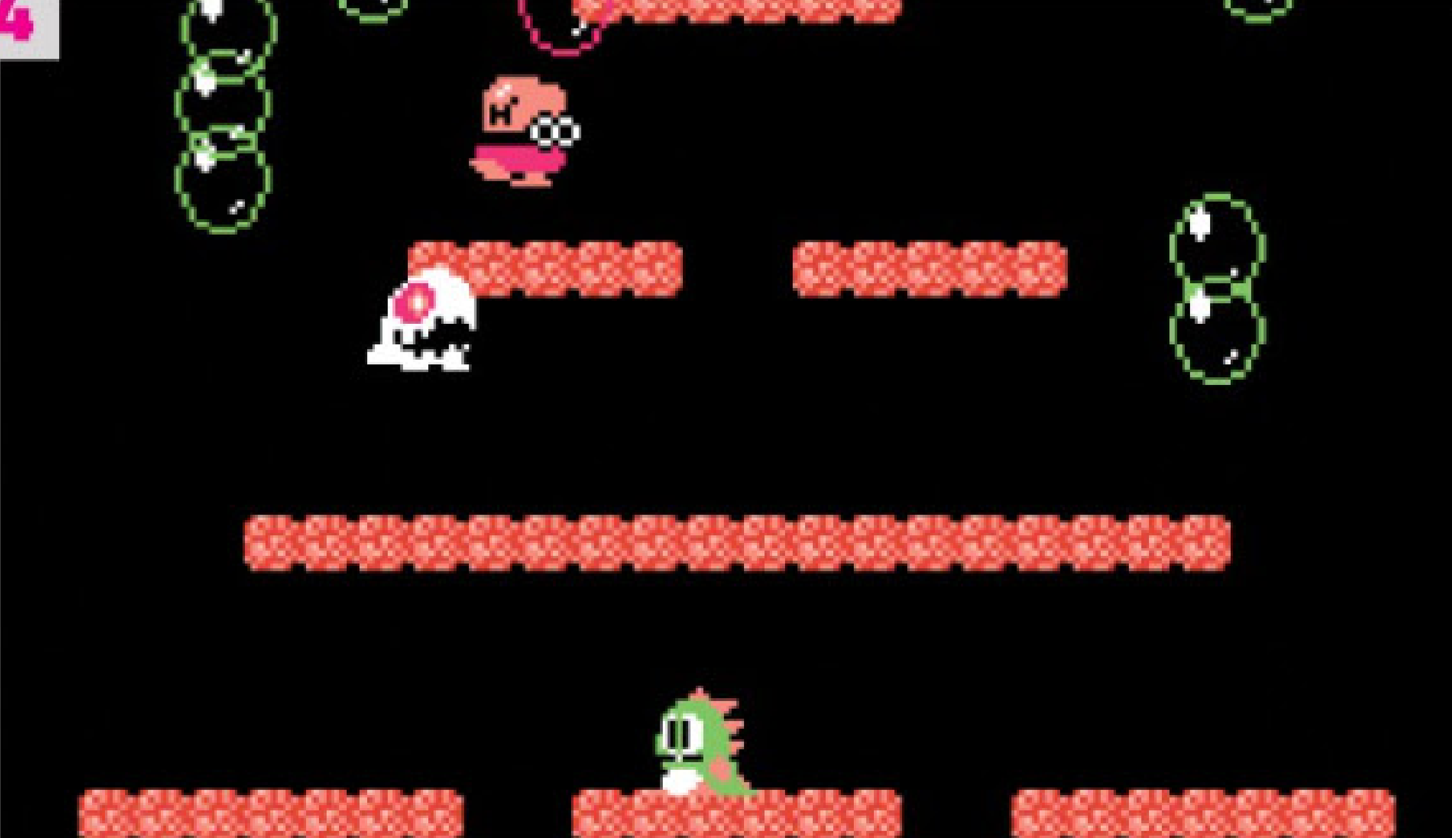
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The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask
In-game time limit: 3 days

1 One of the first open-world games to make use of the 'doom clock' mechanic in its gameplay, *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask* was incredibly ahead of its time in this regard, playing with the idea of the 'doom clock' and player-enacted time travel. Using the famous ocarina, you could throw yourself back to three in-game days before the cursed moon falls upon the central hub of clock town. These three days translate to 54 real-time minutes (give or take) in which it's impossible to complete everything the game offers; to combat this, you must achieve certain goals, send yourself back, and then do others... within just 54 minutes each time.

Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII
In-game time limit: 13 days

2 Lightning's third adventure saw Square Enix mix up the formula for the *Final Fantasy* series, taking some notable lessons from *Ocarina Of Time*. However, instead of having the option to almost infinitely loop the amount of time you had until The End, *Lightning Returns* imposed a far stricter 13 days on you (with each day lasting 24 hours, and each minute corresponding to two and a half real-world seconds). This timer was active during cutscenes, battles and missions; there was no escape other than expensively weighted abilities. Some critics say this hemmed the game in, others said it injected a much-needed sense of urgency.

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor
In-game time limit: 7 days

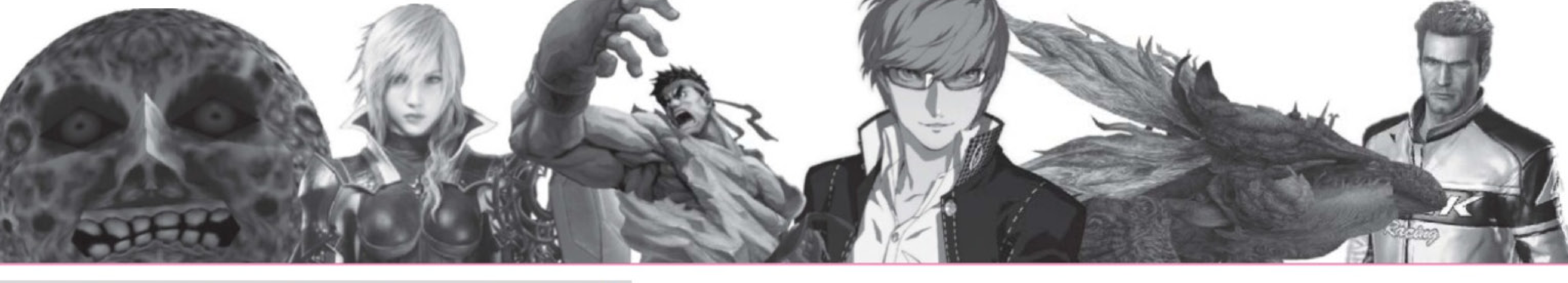
3 Remember that website that supposedly let you predict when you were going to die, based on a series of questions you answered? Well, that's pretty much the premise of *Devil Survivor* – Atlus' tactical RPG in which the protagonist can see a visible death clock above everyone's heads, as Tokyo is quarantined from the rest of Japan after an outbreak of demons. Initially, most people's timer is perilously low (including your own), but by encountering certain bosses or helping certain NPCs, you can extend your life almost indefinitely. In the 3DS re-release – *Overclocked* – you can even achieve a bonus Eighth Day.

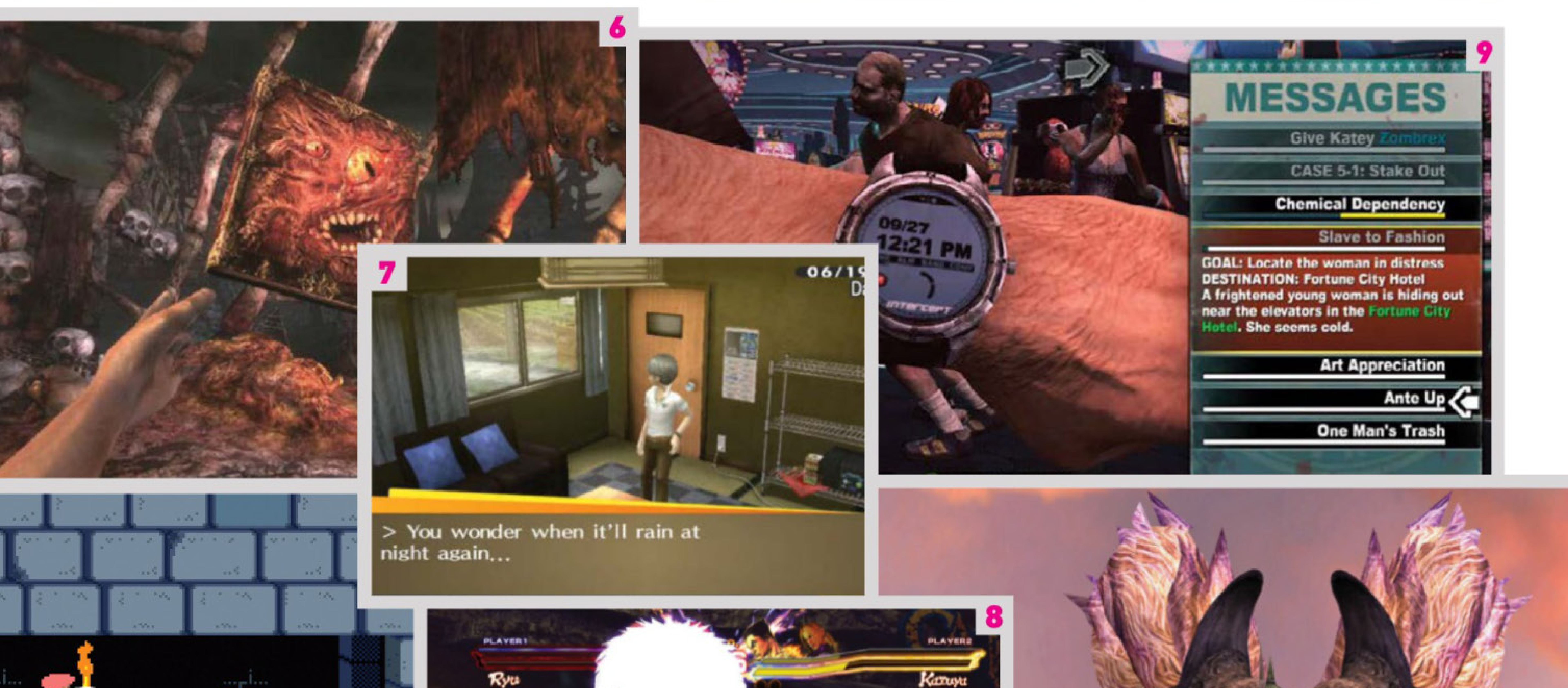
Bubble Bobble
In-game time limit: 1-99 seconds

4 A little more straightforward than the other doom timers that appear in this list, the appearance of the invincible Baron Von Bubba in 1988's *Bubble Bobble* spelt out almost certain death. Triggered by the level's timer running out, Baron Von Bubba would emerge from the edge of a level, flying purely at 90-degree angles to hunt down midget dinosaurs Bub and Bob. The unstoppable albino ghost-whale thing would be ceaseless in his pursuit of the player, and every second wasted per stage brought you closer to the unwinnable confrontation that'd even have Captain Ahab feeling intimidated.

Prince Of Persia
In-game time limit: 1 hour

5 The tired stereotype of having the strapping hero rescue the delicate maiden is made a little more forgivable when it's given ridiculous completion conditions. If the 1989 release of *Prince Of Persia* proved anything, it's that point. After the nameless Princess rejects antagonist Jaffar's threat of marriage, the player is given *exactly* one hour to escape the dungeon they find themselves thrown into and climb the obstacle-filled tower Jaffar locked the Princess in. There is no limit on lives, per se, but every death will set you back to the start of the stage, each time edging you ever closer to the Princess' execution.





Soul Sacrifice
In-game time limit: Around three weeks

6 *Soul Sacrifice*'s sense of impending doom is generated through its narrative more than its gameplay, but still – the protagonist's major motivation for progressing is to halt the end of the world; the ultimate end-game, really. Initially very cynical, the game slowly introduces a few idealistic concepts. Companionship and hope, fittingly – the hope of galvanising your stance against the monsters that have come to inhabit the world. In *Soul Sacrifice*, you're nothing more than a cosmic plaything, and the looming end acts as a staunch punctuation however you choose to play, and is surprisingly satisfying.

Persona 4
In-game time limit: up to 11 days at a time

7 In *Persona 4*, you play as a transfer student that's arrived in a small prefecture to study. Progression comes in two parts – standard JRPG level progression within the 'TV world', a place where suppressed emotions manifest as demons, and acceptance of your true self yields power; and the real world, where making friends grants more power to crafted demons. The doom clock comes in the form of weather – in a noire murder mystery, you know that every time three days worth of rain is coming, someone will die, and thus have to act with haste. Overall it's innovative and surprisingly motivational.

Street Fighter X Tekken
In-game time limit: Around 8 seconds

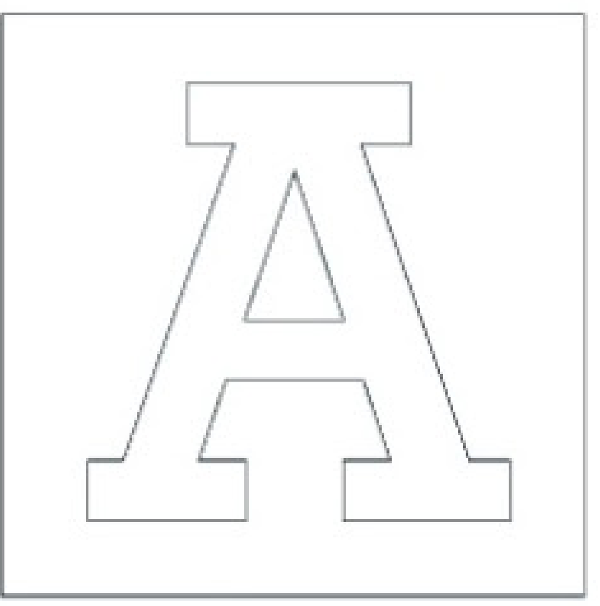
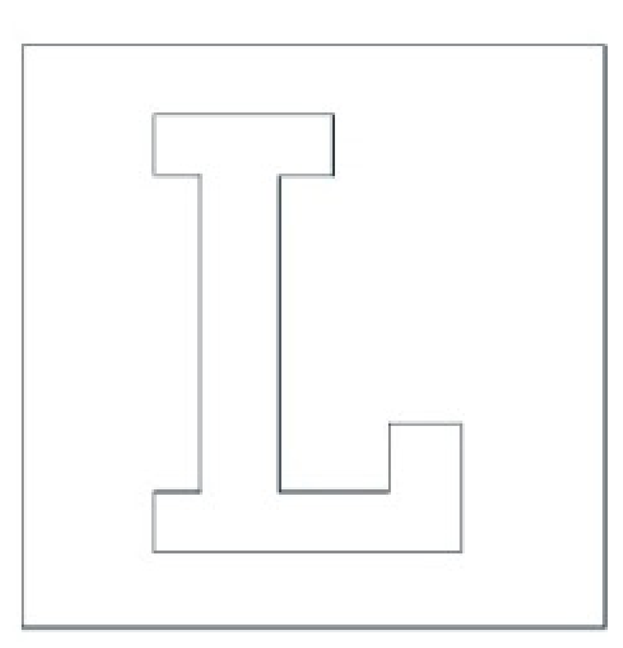
8 After a meteor crashes in the Antarctic containing a strange box-like artefact that archaeologists dub 'Pandora', fighters from all over the world begin to exhibit strange and addictive behaviours towards the power that emanates from the box. In battle, this corresponds to the ability to sacrifice one of your fighters to infuse another with dark power, and the potential to use EX and Super Arts infinitely. The downside is that once triggered, the fighter in question has about eight seconds to knock out their opponent, lest the blood-hungry power of Pandora take the user's life instead. The biggest gamble-based timer in this list.

Dead Rising 2
In-game time limit: 72 hours

9 After protagonist Chuck Greene's daughter gets bitten by a zombie, the guilt-stricken father is given 72 hours before the military arrives and firebombs the whole city. Chuck's infected daughter also requires doses of anti-zombie pathogen Zombrex every 24 hours. The player has to rush against two timers, then; both the countdown on Chuck's daughter, and the impending localised carpet bombing the military plan to initiate to suppress the zombie threat. Many players disliked the constraints of *Dead Rising 2*, but you have to admit they were a *lot* more refined than in the first game...

Final Fantasy X
In-game time limit: about 10 minutes

10 There's only one specific part of *Final Fantasy X* in which you are given a tight doom-clock time limit before confronting unavoidable and untimely death, and that's during the fight against Sin. The giant whale-god – the embodiment of natural disasters – opens its mouth and hits you with Giga-Gravtion, resulting in an auto-game over. There's an invisible counter ticking down to your demise, too, sort of represented by Sin's overdrive gauge, but once the floating angel of death begins to edge open up its maw, Tidus and his team of unlikely heroes had better hustle unless they want to grant ultimate destruction to the entirety of Spira.

THE 
VAULT



MAD CATZ MOJO

MANUFACTURER: **MAD CATZ** PRICE: **£200**

WHILE OUYA AND GameStick haven't been quite so warmly embraced as some might have expected, the concept of the Android micro-console continues to soldier onwards and earlier this year Mad Catz entered the market with Mojo. Pitched as the most powerful gaming and media box on the market, it enables gamers to play Android games and stream media in HD or 4K Ultra High Definition. However, rather than having its own store it enables you to access Android games you already own, alongside Ouya's library of titles. Here's the first of the console's problem, given that it doesn't have a touchscreen interface – players have to get used to using the console's compatible controller to navigate the basic Google OS. However, that's not so much of an issue once you're in-game. Titles zip along and Mad Catz hasn't skimped on the technical specs; Mojo boasts the same Tegra 4 chipset that powers the Nvidia Shield. This is a hugely versatile piece of hardware that rewards those that explore its potential.

BOSS MONSTER: THE DUNGEON-BUILDING CARD GAME

MANUFACTURER: **BROTHERWISE** PRICE: **$25**

SUBVERTING THE TRADITIONAL dungeon crawl scenario, Boss Monster is a card game with a canny gameplay twist: you're the titular adversary of the title attempting to thwart any adventurers that trespass into your lair. The goal is for each player to build both the most appealing and nefarious dungeon to lure and kill more adventurers than your opponents. Collecting more treasure lures more heroes into your dungeon, however you can only create one room per turn, and you need to add hazardous areas to make sure any wayward explorers are executed in a timely fashion – if a hero reaches you then you take damage; take too much and you're out. Although there is an element of luck, strategy remains crucially fundamental throughout to affirm itself as a game of skill above all else. It's one of the most inventive and immersive takes on the card game genre in some time.







ATLAS AND P-BODY FIGURES

Want to own the two stars of *Portal 2*'s multiplayer? Well, now you can! Scaled down into seven glorious inches, you can create your own murderous scientific test facility at home with the aid of these two cybernetic life-buddies.

http://tinyurl.com/o3gg7gx



BORDERLANDS 2 SWAG-FILLED LIMITED EDITION LOOT CHEST

Full of collectables in in-game treats, this loot chest is packed with *Borderlands* goodness. Although, if you're anything like us you'll remove all that and just fill it full of biscuits.

http://tinyurl.com/dx6yg47



VAULT BOY PLUSH

Ever thought your soft toy collection lacked a little motivational zing? (Also: why do you have a soft toy collection?) Then this Vault Boy plush, with its improbably sized head and go-to winning attitude, should certainly give you the inspiring lift you need.

http://tinyurl.com/na9mmtv

GAMING CLOTHING



WATCH DOGS FOX LOGO HAT

What better way to assert your anonymity by covering up roughly a third of your head with this cap based on *Watch Dogs*' Aiden Pearce's own headgear.

http://tinyurl.com/q5cnx3d



GREEN HILL RUNNING CLUB T-SHIRT

Designed to showcase your love of *Sonic* rather than actually being practical running wear, this nifty official T-shirt tips its hat to Sonic's first game.

http://tinyurl.com/lyqk7ng



GENKI LEGGINGS

If you love *Saints Row* then you're probably a moderately ridiculous person anyway. Why not go one further with these Super Murder Cat leggings.

http://tinyurl.com/lf9mq9c

WATCH DOGS: ORIGINAL GAME SOUNDTRACK

ARTIST: **BRIAN REITZELL** PRICE: **£10.99**

SCORED BY BRIAN Reitzell of *Hannibal* fame, Reitzell brings his moody stylings to Ubisoft's open-world hacking opus. The soundtrack has been as divisive as the game itself, its mix of downbeat electronics and echoing synth beats making for an atmospheric, if at times uncomfortable counterpart to the immoral activities taking place within the game (in some parts quite literally, as percussion frantically beats between the left and right channels).

However, at other times the score drops into more sombre themes. Escape From Chicago's arrangement of strings conveys the emotional turmoil tugging away at the game's heart. Much like the game it won't be to everyone's tastes. Yet, while unconventional in places, Reitzell's work is bold and epic in scope and very much worthy of your attention.



VERDICT 7/10



VERDICT 7/10

BEST OF SILENT HILL: MUSIC FROM THE VIDEO GAME SERIES

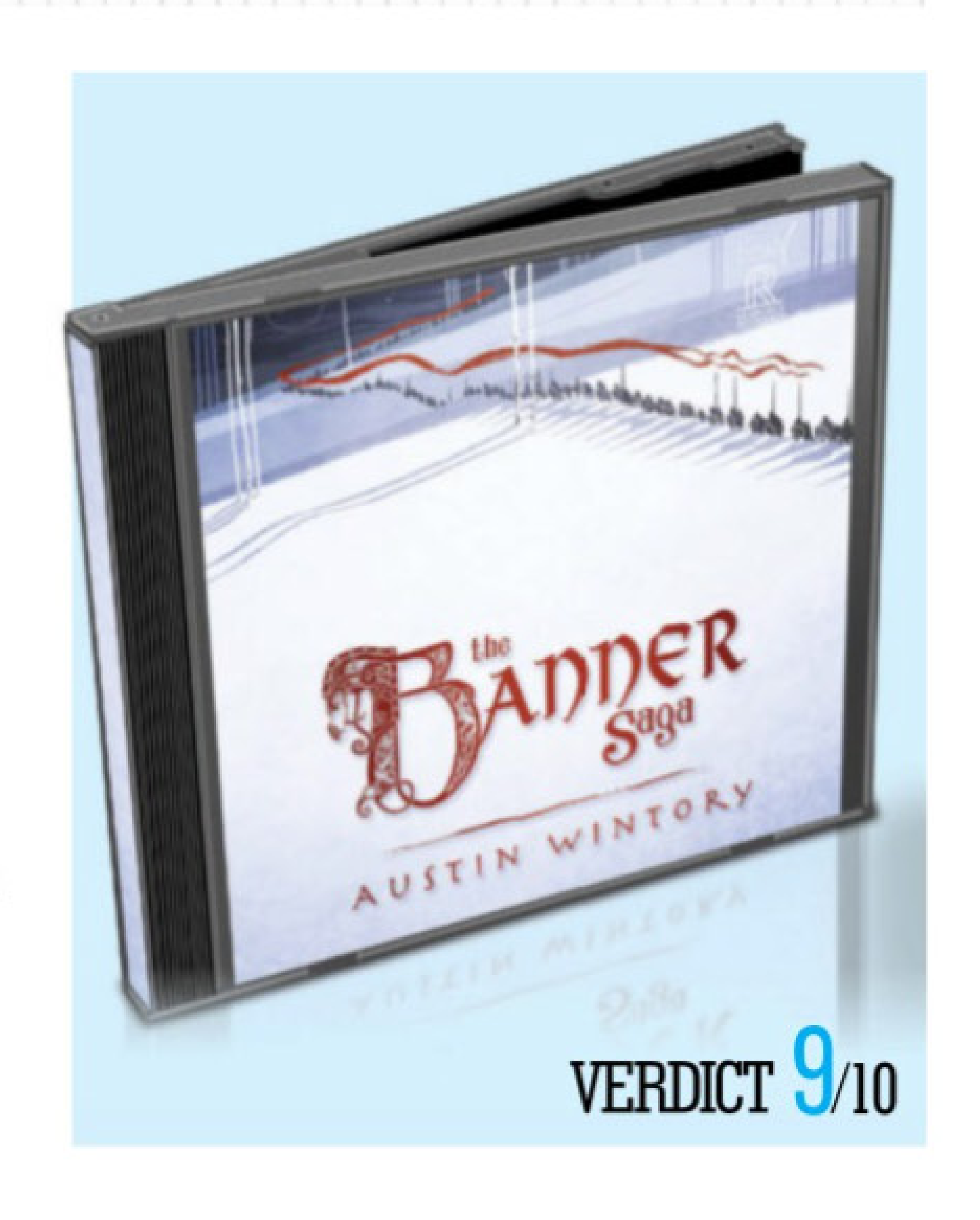
ARTIST: **EDGAR ROTHERMICH** PRICE: **£12.99**

A COLLECTION OF haunting themes composed by Akira Yamaoka across the entire *Silent Hill* franchise and remixed here by Edgar Rothermich. It's a stirring reminder of just how potent the effect of music was in amplifying the tension and terror across Konami's premiere horror series, albeit with a slightly different take here. Rothermich's interpretations of many of the core themes have the tendency to stray wayward of Yamaoka's original ambiance, which leaves a few of the tracks paling in comparison to their original recordings. Despite this, the collection remains an affectionate tribute to both *Silent Hill* and its original composer, bolstered by an informative illustrated booklet that should placate fans hungry for another slice of horror.

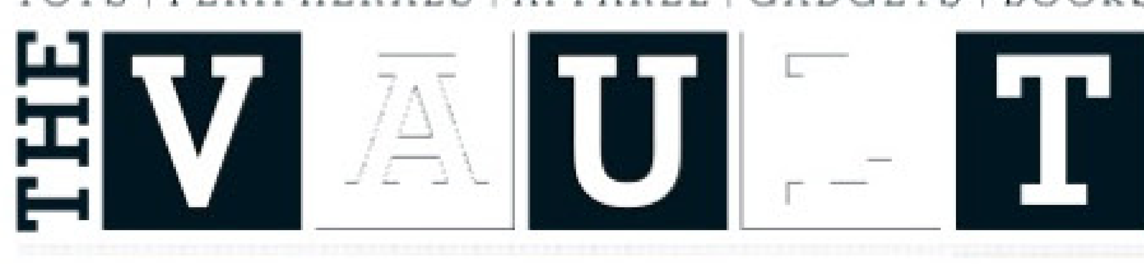
THE BANNER SAGA

MANUFACTURER: **ALFRED** PRICE: **$14.99-$45.99**

WRITTEN BY THE Grammy-nominated composer of Journey, Austin Wintory, *The Banner Saga*'s arresting soundtrack plays an integral part in conveying the heroic but often unforgiving wilderness that the players face throughout the game released at the beginning of the year. The stripped-back sound often utilises eclectic instruments (such as the didgeridoo) to create a cold, harsh effect that's punctuated by stirring themes of grandeur. Of course, there's a comfortable air of Celtic folklore found sprinkled throughout the tracklist that, alongside a combination of themes, creates a mature, dramatically diverse piece of work you'd expect from Wintory. It's not as monothematic as his work on *Journey*, but Wintory's reliance on themes to conduct players through the tempestuous land of *The Banner Saga* has the grace and authority not unlike the epics that play out on the big screen. Once again, Wintory asserts both his inimitable knack for evocative storytelling and himself as one most skilled composers working today.

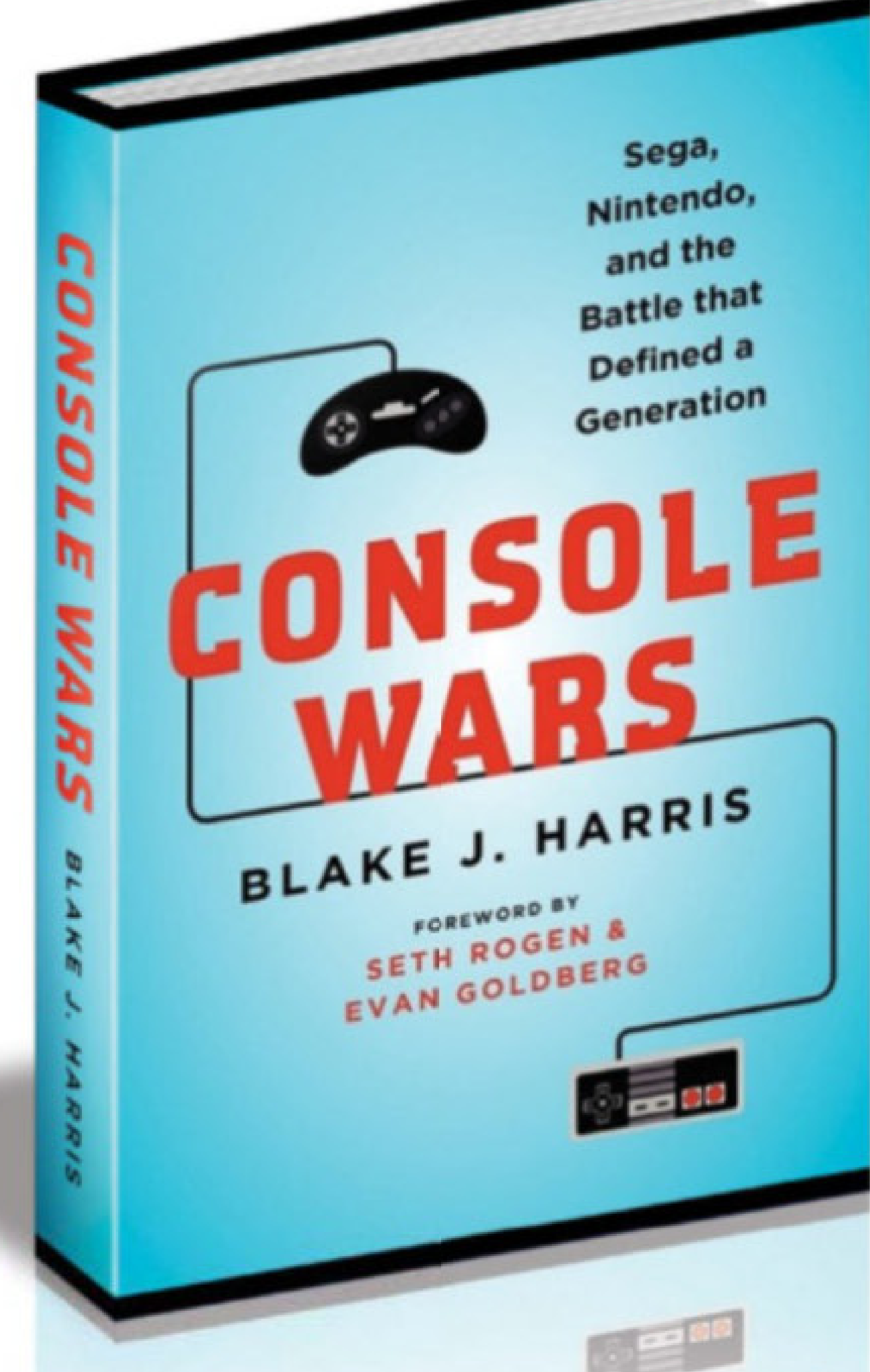


VERDICT 9/10



CONSOLE WARS

AUTHOR: **BLAKE J. HARRIS**
PUBLISHER: **HARPERCOLLINS**



FOR ANY CHILD who grew up in the Nineties there was one all-important question: Nintendo or Sega? But far from just a mere playground rivalry, the two businesses spent years battling it out for industry dominance. Harris' portrayal of the two is a little uneven – Sega are pitted as the David against Nintendo's Goliath as the two scrapped during the development and release of the Mega Drive and SNES. However, there's a incredibly entertaining recounting of events here, one that has understandably garnered the attention of Hollywood as it almost traces the backhandedness and genuine ingenuity that underpinned *The Social Network*'s sleazy narrative (albeit with a slightly more comic twist – the movie adaptation already in the pipeline is co-written by Seth Rogen).

What's fascinating is how overlooked some of the major, instrumental players in the success of each company were. The nominal hero here is Tom Kalinske, who through aggressive marketing tactics fought back against Nintendo's post-Atari command over the US marketplace – particularly through the inspired 'Sixteen Weeks Of Summer' campaign that ran in 1991, which overshadowed the launch of SNES across much of the country.

There's unprecedented access behind the scenes that offers a fresh perspective of the events that transpired. Of particular interest is how Sega almost partnered with Sony when the latter was interested in entering the console market, while Harris also talks at length about the success of *Sonic The Hedgehog* which, as he describes it, was not down to the game's designer Yuji Naka, but to the triumph of the game's marketing.

It's a no-holds-barred account of an old-school videogame rivalry the likes of which have not been seen since. It's not massively insightful in regards to videogames as a creative form but what it does offer is a thrilling account of events that offers a revelatory story behind two of the most pioneering videogame companies of all time.

VERDICT 9/10



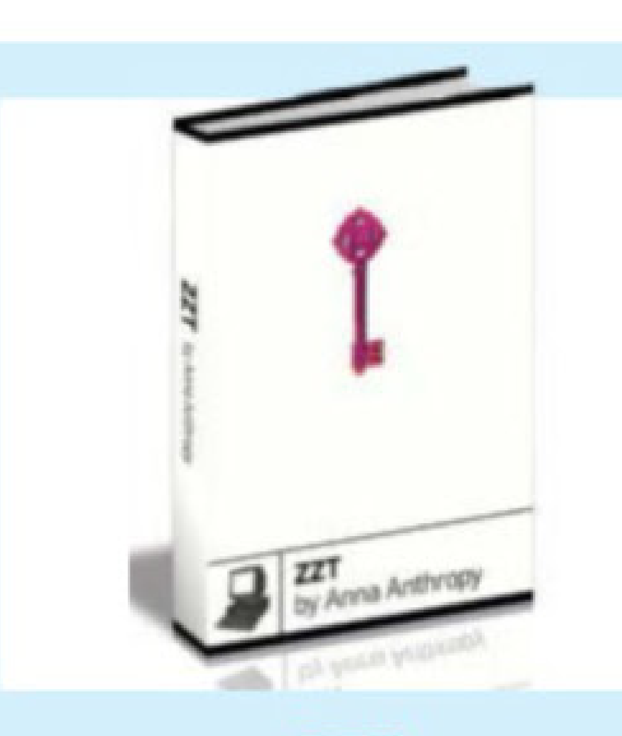
LEGEND OF ZELDA ULTIMATE MANGA BOX SET

Did you know there was such a thing as *The Legend Of Zelda* manga? Well there is. And you can own the entire ten-chapter set right now that covers Link's adventures from *Ocarina Of Time* through to *The Phantom Hourglass*.
http://tinyurl.com/mjcx5g8



THE ART OF WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

It's not just about Nazis on the moon and explicit gore in this art book, it relishes in the amount of detail that permeates every bit of the world – from guns to incidental propaganda posters.
http://tinyurl.com/l4omgha



ZZT

A study of Tim Sweeney's curious MS-DOS shareware title *ZZT*, this delves into the impact its world editor had on gaming – a rallying call-to-arms for would-be developers in waiting. Author Anna Anthropy makes a fascinating case for *ZZT* being one of the most important games of all time.
http://tinyurl.com/puhwoyh



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